



SS PANZER UNIT ATTACKED ENTIRE TANK DIVISION



Bringing History to Life

FAITHFUL TO DEATH

Hell on the Eastern Front

SS fought to the last man for Adolf Hitler

Nazis tried to cleanse Europe

Elite units murdered "Untermensch" in cold blood

NAZI

STORMTROOPERS

SOLDIERS ★ BATTLES ★ WAR CRIMES



HEINRICH HIMMLER

SS chief cultivated occult religion and secret rituals



TOTENKOPF DIVISION

KZ-camp guards in feared Panzer unit

OFFICER IMPALED ENEMIES ★ SS AGENT LIBERATED MUSSOLINI



CONTENTS

NAZI STORMTROOPERS

OVERVIEW

- 4 Hitler's black stormtroopers
- 24 Terror campaign in Europe

SS UNITS

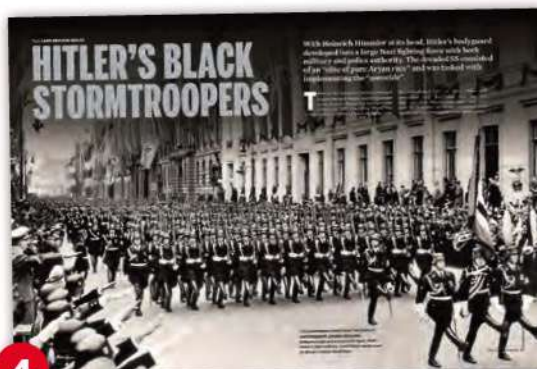
- 14 The hate brigade
- 46 KZ guards at the front
- 82 Teenage army held Caen
- 102 SS pioneered war materiel
- 114 Hitler's division

EVENTS

- 62 SS force's bold raid
- 72 SS's ugly reprisals
- 110 Unholy alliance held SS at bay

SS PERSONNEL

- 34 The Butcher of Lyons
- 80 Warsaw's executioner went free after the war
- 92 Tiger ace



4



34



14



46



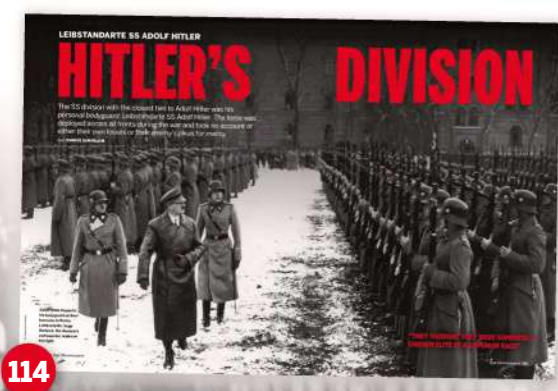
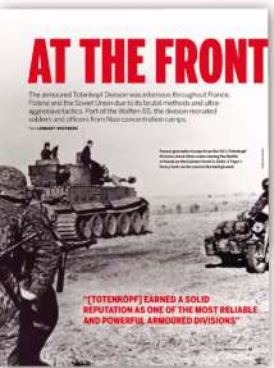
24



62



The Führer
inspects troops
from his own
personal bodyguard,



Waffen-SS's bloody hands

In March 1943, the Italian resistance movement initiated an assault against a SS police force in Rome and 50 Germans were killed. The response was swift: 335 Italians were picked at random and executed in caves outside the city.

A bloody trail followed the SS – not least among its military wing, the Waffen-SS – on the battlefields from Normandy to the Caucasus. The organisation, established as Hitler's personal bodyguard, has a reputation for being one of history's most brutal, responsible for countless massacres of civilians and captured enemies in occupied territories.

“The SS believed itself an elite race of superhumans”

Its indifference to human life derives from the fact the SS believed itself to be an elite race of superhumans. The criteria for entering the Waffen-SS was tough, and only pure-bred Aryans with a perfect past were admitted. By the end of the war, however, the image was crumbling. As their crimes became known, many SS soldiers ditched the revealing SS runes on their uniform and tried to hide among the ordinary troops. Read the harsh story of the Waffen-SS – the Nazi Stormtroopers – a story that must never be forgotten.

Happy reading!

Text: **LARS ERICSON WOLKE**

HITLER'S BLACK STORMTROOPERS



With Heinrich Himmler at its head, Hitler's bodyguard developed into a large Nazi fighting force with both military and police authority. The dreaded SS consisted of an "elite of pure Aryan race" and was tasked with implementing the "genocide".

There are few acronyms that have managed to generate such disgust and fear in people across Europe during the war-torn 20th century as "SS". Long after World War II had ended, the men in black uniforms with

the rune-shaped "SS" on their collars still personified evil. But what was the SS? How did this organisation work and why were its members so clearly associated with cruelty and fear? During the brutal 20th century, ►



SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, the Führer's own bodyguard, parades along the Wilhelmstraße in Berlin on 20th April, 1939 – Hitler's 50th birthday. Adolf Hitler can be seen on the left side of the picture.

HITLER'S STORMTROOPERS



Men from the SA and SS post anti-Semitic propaganda outside a Jewish-owned fashion shop in Berlin in 1933.

- ▶ when it came to inhuman abuse the competition was literally murderous.

IN GERMANY, WHERE the country struggled to recover from the humiliating peace after the war in 1918, political differences were stark, and many organisations provided their own armed militia. These would protect meetings and, if possible, destroy political opponents.

But it was the Nazi party, founded in 1920, which eventually developed the largest and most effective militia, with its brown-shirted SA (*Sturmabteilung* or storm battalion) troops that increasingly dominated the streets. Soon, street fighting between the SA and the communist Red Front Fighters' League became an everyday sight in many German cities.

After the Nazis took power in 1933, the SA grew so that by 1934 it had a mind-boggling four million members. In the eyes of the leadership of

the Nazi party with Adolf Hitler at its head, the SA continued to develop into a blunt instrument that almost lived a separate life with its own agenda. It appeared the Nazis needed another – completely loyal – armed force.

HITLER HAD ALREADY created a small group of personal bodyguards, and this group formed the core of an armed corps founded in 1923. Two years later, in 1925, the name *Schutzstaffeln* – protection squadron – was abbreviated to “SS”. The members had black uniforms, and they were required to give their complete loyalty to the Führer.

Initially, the SS was formally under SA leadership, but early on members considered themselves as an elite force who, in practice, only took orders from Hitler himself.

On 6th January, 1929 Heinrich Himmler was appointed national leader, *Reichsführer*, for the SS. The still quite insignificant bodyguard suddenly saw a major expansion in power and size – the corps swelled from a few hundred men in 1929 to 52,000 by the end of 1932. At the same time, conflict with the SA's Brownshirts also increased.

“IN 1939, AN ENORMOUS SECURITY NETWORK HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED”



HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS/GETTY

SS leader Heinrich Himmler (1900-45) was Nazi Germany's most powerful man after Hitler. Here he is speaking in Linz in Austria in 1938.

On 30th June, 1934 this power struggle exploded within the Nazi party when Hitler – using Himmler and the SS as his primary instrument – cleared out elements of the SA leadership, which Hitler now believed to be far too independent and radically left wing.

88 people, with SA chief Ernst Röhm in the lead, were killed by SS murder squads during the “Night of the Long Knives”. Three weeks later, Himmler received his reward when his SS achieved autonomy from the SA and became an independent organisation within the Nazi party's NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party) framework. The road was now open for continued growth and expansion.

HITLER'S SIMPLE TACTIC for governing Germany was to play different players and groups off one another – in other words, divide and rule. The development of parallel structures within party and state apparatus made perfect sense to him.

Thus, there was no resistance when in 1931 Himmler and his closest ally Reinhard Heydrich began building their own security service within ►



BILDERWELT/VOLLET/IBL

There were departments within the SS that would ensure the future of the Aryan race. The photo is from a survey from the SS Race and Settlement Main Office.

HITLER'S STORMTROOPERS

► the SS: the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*). After the Nazis took power in 1933, the Gestapo, a secret state police, was also established under Himmler's leadership. It was responsible for direct monitoring of potential political opposition within Germany.

By the time Himmler had become head of the civilian police in 1939, an enormous security network had been established. It was organised under a National Security Board (RSHA), bringing together the SD, Gestapo and the regular police force as well as providing other security functions.

The state and party functions had become fused together. In practice, the RSHA couldn't be separated from the SS as Himmler was head of both.

A SEPARATE UNIT, SS's *Totenkopfverbände* (Death's Head Unit), was created to guard concentration camps that had been built to house the regime's political opponents. These would be the foundation of the major expansion of labour and extermination camps where millions of people would eventually die.

Other special features within the growing SS empire consisted of more rationalised ideological bodies. Himmler wanted to bind the militia to the ideology of the party and Germany: pure-blood

"NEAR THE POLISH CULTURAL CAPITAL OF KRAKÓW, AN UNIMAGINABLE 1.5 MILLION PEOPLE WERE KILLED FROM 1941-45"

leaders that would secure the future of the Aryan race at the expense of the likes of Jews and Slavs.

This would require an ideological arsenal, which led to the establishment of the *Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS* (RuSHA, or SS Race and Settlement Main Office) alongside such think tanks as *Ahnenerbe* (Ancestral Heritage) and *Lebensborn* (Fount of Life). Racial biologists, archaeologists, historians and other researchers gathered to create the "scientific" basis for the development of Nazi ideology and racial policy in occupied territories.

The result was a combination of fact, fantasy and misinterpretation.

ONE OF THE most extreme examples of the SS's racial ►

In April 1943, an armed riot broke out in the ghetto in Warsaw. The picture shows how the last surviving Jews were driven out by SS soldiers.





NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

After being taken prisoners of war by German SS troops on 17th December, 1944, 50-60 American soldiers were killed by machine gun outside the Belgian city of Malmédy.

Massacre in Malmédy

★ On 16th December, 1944 Germany launched a final, but futile counteroffensive against the Allies in the Ardennes mountains. As a spearhead for the attack, soldiers from 1st SS Panzer Division “Leibstandarte-SS Adolf Hitler” worked under the leadership of SS-Standartenführer Joachim Peiper.

On 17th December, the division encircled soldiers from Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia (Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion) in the Belgian city of Malmédy. Peiper’s men disarmed the Americans, who were then taken to a field and shot. 50-60 prisoners of war were killed while 30 managed to escape.

Malmédy became the symbol of several similar massacres by SS forces, and there was a huge call for reprisals in the United States. Despite his absence, Peiper was blamed for the massacre after the war.

In a war crimes trial in the former concentration camp Dachau in May 1946, Peiper and 42 of his men were sentenced to death. However, several mistakes were made both during the interrogations and the trial itself, so all the death penalties were commuted to prison sentences. Peiper was the last to be released in 1956. He settled in France, where he was murdered by unknown perpetrators in 1976.



ULLSTEIN BILD/BL

After the war ended, 73 SS commanders were sentenced at court in Dachau accused of being involved in the massacre at Malmédy. Peiper is on the far right of the first row. 16th May, 1946.



A delegation including Himmler inspects the construction of Auschwitz.

► ideology at work was the Lebensborn programme. A total of 11,000 children born out of wedlock were put in the 13 different so-called homes in a programme that deliberately intended to increase Germany's "pure race" population.

Not least in occupied Poland, where Lebensborn's doctors were keen to find Polish children who were considered to have the prerequisites for successful Germanisation. Such children were simply stolen from their parents and placed in a foster home. Perhaps as many as 200,000 children were violently taken from their families in this way.

ONE LAST CATEGORY within the SS was the *Waffen-SS* – armed SS troops. Their position was weak for a long time, primarily from the regular army who resisted competition for either men or materials. But the outbreak of war in 1939 changed this. At the start of the campaign against Poland in 1939, the SS played an important role deporting non-desired ethnic groups and creating space for migrant Germans. In this way, thousands of Poles had already been expelled from the areas that were to be "transformed" around the turn of 1939-40.

They would be replaced by, among others, Baltic Germans evacuated from Estonia and Latvia.

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, endless new areas of opportunity were opened. Large areas in the east would be cleared of Russians or Ukrainians and readied for German colonisation. In particular, the Crimean Peninsula and its immediate area was, in Himmler's opinion, a strategically important place for German colonisation with a whole new city, Gothenburg, at the centre.

As a result in January 1942 the so-called Wannsee Conference convened in a villa in a suburb of Berlin. Under the direction of Reinhard Heydrich, the guidelines were drawn up for "The Final Solution", the extermination of Jews in Europe. The annihilation of European Jews became a major task for the SS during the rest of the war, an assignment that demanded more resources in the form of men and vehicles.

WHILE GERMAN FORCES at the front suffered from a glaring lack of transport capacity and reserve troops towards the end of the war, large SS forces and countless trains were used to carry ►



Recruitment poster for the *Waffen-SS* – in Dutch – from 1943.

HITLER'S STORMTROOPERS

ULLSTEIN BILD/IBL



Reinhard Heydrich was Himmler's right-hand man.

► hundreds of thousands of Jews, Romas and others carrying death sentences to extermination camps like Auschwitz. It was a military insane tactic, serving only to emphasise how influential the SS had become in Hitler's Germany, while the army was forced to make do with whatever resources it was given. There was logic to the SS's strategy, however. It administered many millions of concentration-camp and slave labourers in industry and agriculture, which gave the organisation access to huge sums of money. This increasingly important part of the SS's business was administered by its own enterprise: *Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt* (SS Main Economic and Administrative Office).

BY THE TIME the Soviet Union was invaded in 1941, a special command consisting of people from the SS, SD and civilian police had been established that systematically murdered the Jews, Romas, communist officers and others who were not meant to belong in the future Greater Germanic Reich.

The result was an inconceivable orgy of cruelty; the massacre of 34,000 Jews at Babi Yar in Kiev in September 1941 being by far the worst. Then

“HOWEVER, MANY WAR CRIMINALS ESCAPED, PARTLY BECAUSE OF THE SECRET GERMAN ORGANISATION ODESSa”

the task became too large and the mass murders required organising in a completely different way. In 1942, the scale of exterminations exploded with Auschwitz-Birkenau being the largest, and the one that became symbolic of the massacres of Europe's Jews. There, near the Polish cultural capital of Kraków, an unimaginable 1.5 million people were killed from 1941-45.

PARTICULARLY BRUTAL WERE the SS's penal battalions, who in September 1944 under the leadership of General Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski struck down the uprising in Warsaw. When it was over, the Polish capital was in ruins and had to be rebuilt from the ground up after the war.

While the *Allgemeine SS* – the general SS – carried out the extermination of all those whom

An SS man has committed suicide next to a giant portrait of Adolf Hitler. This occurred after the First United States Army took Leipzig on 19th April, 1945.

ULLSTEIN BILD/IBL



the Nazis denied the right to live in their Europe, the *Waffen-SS*, the SS's armed branch, participated in increasing the intensity of war alongside the troops of the regular armed forces. SS forces were equipped equal to – or better than – the regular Wehrmacht and often *Waffen-SS* units were put into crisis situations.

Their ideological fanaticism and ruthless warfare caused them to be feared and detested by both their enemies and parts of the Germans' own armed forces, especially since they committed a series of atrocities against civilians and prisoners of war.

Like the rest of the SS, the *Waffen-SS* was steeped in a race mythology that meant Germanic people from other European countries could be lured into serving for the same ideals. In particular, Scandinavian and Benelux countries were targeted as recruitment sources. Towards the end of the war, major losses forced an increasing relaxation of the recruitment guidelines.

BY 1944, THE number of soldiers in the *Waffen-SS* approached one million, and the organisation had almost become a fourth defence branch next to the regular army, navy and air force.

In the penultimate year of the war the ranks were filled with 400,000 Germans, 300,000 so-called Europeans (people with Germanic origins from the likes of Hungary and Romania) and 250,000 foreigners. The latter were split between 25,000 Dutchmen, 10,000 French, 8,000 Belgians (of whom 5,000 were Flemish), 8,000 Danes, 7,000 Norwegians, 700 Swiss, 200 Swedes, 100 Liechtensteiners and even a small group of Britons.

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union, SS forces recruited among occupied peoples in Stalin's empire, who now joined Germany in the belief they'd receive support in their national struggle for liberty. In this way, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians and Galicians (from the border between South Poland and Western Ukraine and now a part of Western Ukraine) formed SS legions.

Towards the end of the war there were Muslim SS forces, first and foremost in Bosnia and Herzegovina. By then the accumulated losses had forced the SS leadership to relax their Pan-Germanic idealism and take anyone willing to fight in their ranks.

Many SS volunteers with national aspirations for their respective homeland realised with great disappointment that Hitler and the Nazi party's great imperialist ambitions for Germany were at odds with the SS's policy of working hard to recruit different Germanic people, and this led to a stagnation in the number of foreign volunteers signing up that was already noticeable by 1942.

This may have contributed to the giant losses on the Eastern Front where thousands of SS volunteers



became complicit in war crimes. The war crimes process in Nuremberg in 1945-46 declared the SS with all its many sub-organisations as a criminal organisation. The only exception was the SS's riding club. However, many war criminals escaped, partly because of the secret German organisation *Odesa*, which after the war smuggled SS men to Argentina, Paraguay and other Latin American countries.

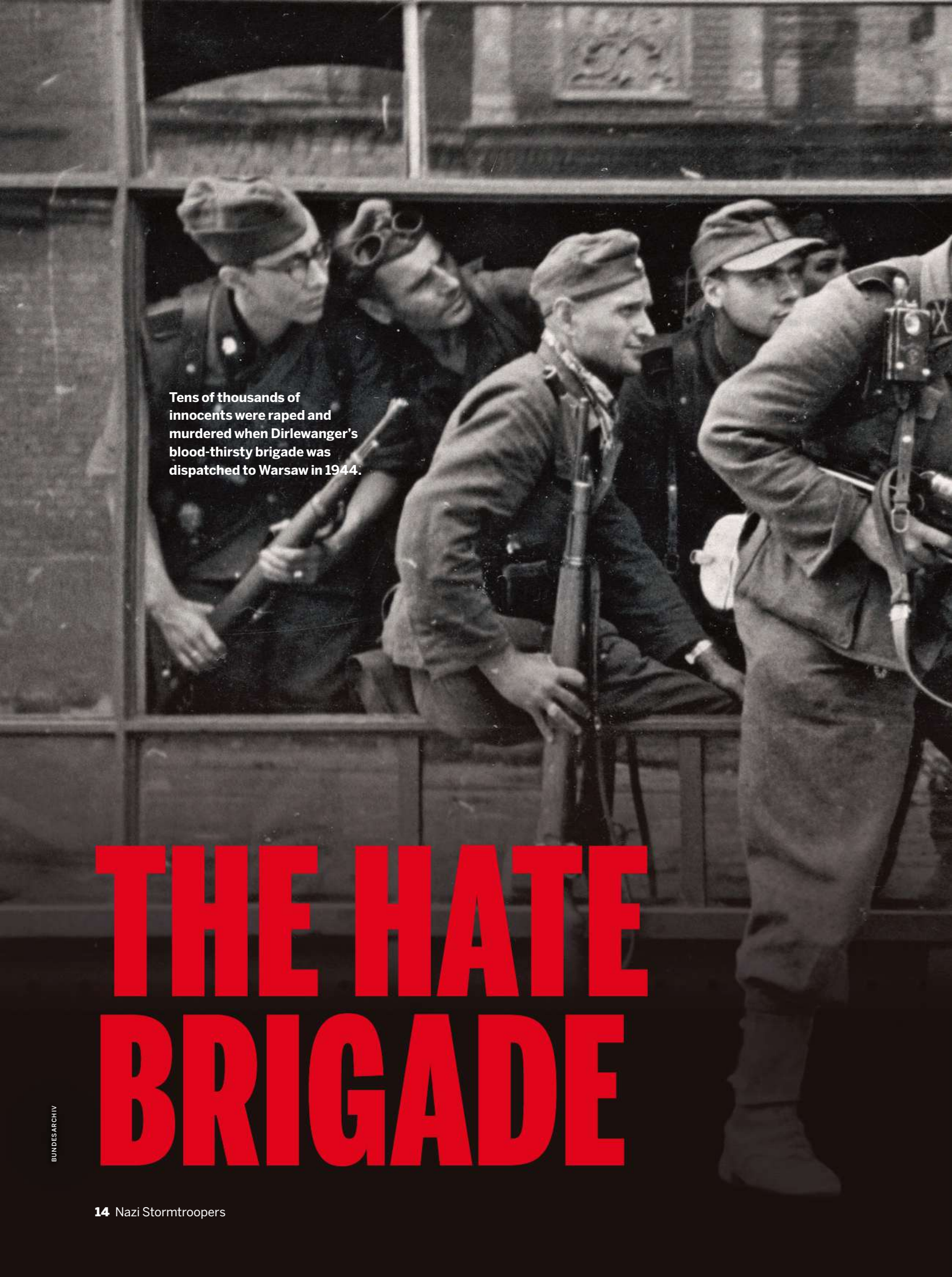
MANY SS WERE nevertheless brought before the court for war crimes cases in Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union and a host of other countries. Several were executed, among them one of the worst criminals in the ranks of the SS, the commandant of the concentration camp in Auschwitz.

Rudolf Höss was hung in April 1947 by Polish authorities in front of the villa that had been his home, next to the Auschwitz camp where he and his men had tortured and murdered so many people. 🇵🇱

The camp commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Rudolf Höss, was sentenced to death by hanging.

Lars Ericson Wolke is an author and professor of war science at the Swedish Defence College.

Further reading: *The SS: A historical warning* (2004) by Guido Knopp. *The Master Plan: Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust* (2007) by Heather Pringle. *Swedes at War: 1914-1945* (2010) by Lars Gyllenhaal and Lennart Westberg.

A black and white photograph showing several Nazi stormtroopers in a train car. They are wearing leather uniforms, caps, and some have goggles on their foreheads. They are holding rifles and looking out of the open windows of the train car. The background shows the structure of the train and some buildings outside.

Tens of thousands of innocents were raped and murdered when Dirlwanger's blood-thirsty brigade was dispatched to Warsaw in 1944.

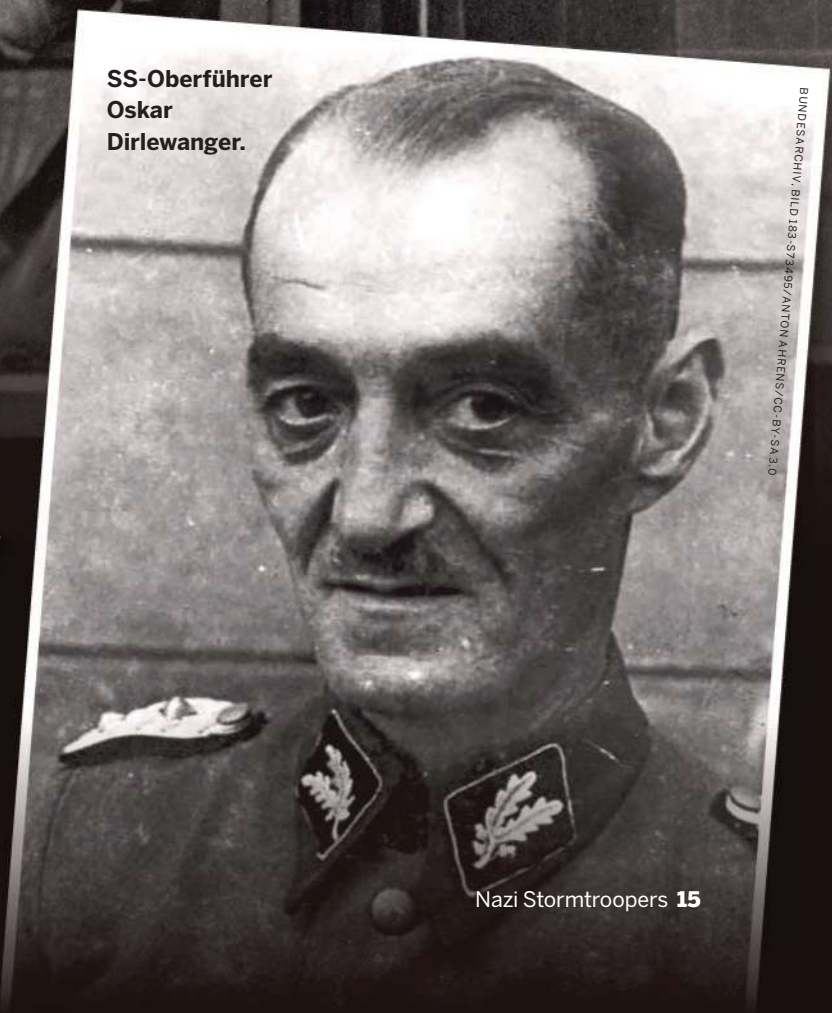
THE HATE BRIGADE



Poachers, murderers and rapists are armed and placed in a special SS unit for hardened criminals. The bloodthirsty brigade – created by Heinrich Himmler and led by a sadistic sex offender – is unleashed in occupied territories across eastern Europe. ▶

Text: **ESBEN SYLVEST**

SS-Oberführer
Oskar
Dirlewanger.



BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 183-57385/ANTONAHRENS, CC-BY-SA 3.0



Said about Oskar Dirlewanger...

"Though intelligent, he was a liar, an alcoholic, and a pervert who molested children"

Richard C Lukas,
historian, specialist in
Poland during World
War II

**"Violently
sadistic"**

Richard Rhodes, American
journalist, historian and
Pulitzer Prize winner.

"A mentally unstable, violent fanatic and alcoholic, who had the habit of erupting into violence under the influence of drugs"

Police report describing Dirlewanger in WWI

"An expert in extermination and a devotee of sadism and necrophilia"

J Bowyer Bell, US historian
and political adviser

"A psychopathic killer and child molester"

Steven Zaloga, US military historian

Even the most battle-hardened German soldiers stopped and stared in amazement. The new SS unit that had just arrived to assist in the battle against a partisan uprising was like nothing the veterans had seen. The men in the so-called *SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger* (Dirlewanger Brigade) seemed agitated, stank of booze and wore no insignias on their uniforms.

The newly arrived SS soldiers didn't hesitate before unleashing a bestial roar and strode forward despite intense fire from enemy snipers. Many died but the brigade did not halt its relentless advance.

The battalion with a seeming death wish slotted in perfectly with its chaotic surroundings. The Warsaw Uprising of 1944 had just erupted, and Polish resistance fighters battled from house to house as they strove to expel the occupying power. The rebellion marked the start of a bloody madness with battles in sewers and fierce knife-to-knife duels in the city's dark cellars.

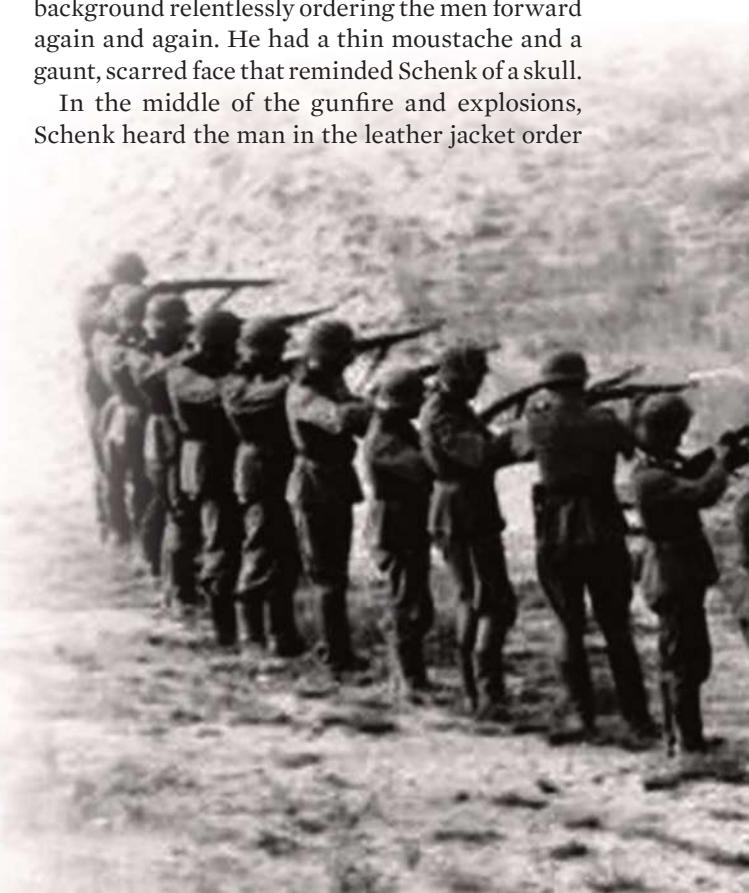
ONE OF THE soldiers in Warsaw was 18-year-old Matthias Schenk – a German national from Belgium. He served in an engineering unit whose orders had been to retake a street in Warsaw's city centre. They'd failed: resistance was fierce and the enemy seemed invincible – until the Dirlewanger Brigade showed up on the streets and launched its brutal assault.

After the brigade's first tank had been struck by the Poles, the SS pulled civilians from their homes

and ordered both women and the old to climb on to the rest of the tanks that followed as human shields. One woman lost her young daughter when the child was pinned under the tank tracks. Immediately a SS soldier shot her in the head to silence her screams. Any civilian who tried to escape was simply shot in the back.

Schenk later recounted how he'd seen a tall and lean man in a black leather jacket standing in the background relentlessly ordering the men forward again and again. He had a thin moustache and a gaunt, scarred face that reminded Schenk of a skull.

In the middle of the gunfire and explosions, Schenk heard the man in the leather jacket order



"WHY NOT LOOK FOR SUITABLE CANDIDATES AMONG THE VILLAINS?"

Himmler urges Dirlewanger to find soldiers among criminals.

his men to kill all the Poles – including women and children. Later, Schenk came to understand that the man with the skeletal face was Oskar Dirlewanger, an obscure sadist who led the feared SS brigade. The bloodthirsty group consisted of convicted violent offenders and disorderly soldiers who'd been thrown out of other SS units.

The Dirlewanger Brigade was probably Heinrich Himmler's most insane scheme. When the SS chief came upon the idea in the spring of 1940, he barely imagined the kind of destructive force he'd unleash. The plan was simply to gather convicted poachers, thieves and other minor felons from German prisons in a unit where they could be more useful than sat in their cells.

AT FIRST, RECRUITS were carefully selected. Hitler had approved that poachers be reprieved, but inserted a condition that the SS unit only include those convicted of illegal hunting with firearms – not traps and snares. Moreover, they had to be repeat offenders – the unit wasn't to be staffed by half-hearted amateurs, but menfolk with a proven willingness to kill, the Führer stated.

By June 1940, the SS had chosen the brigade's first 84 men. Two months later, a force of 300 recruits gathered in the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen north of Berlin. There they received brief military training and met their new commander for the first time: Oskar Dirlewanger.

Dirlewanger was 44 years old and had – to put it mildly – a chequered past: He had a doctorate in economics and was highly decorated during World War I where he was injured several times in combat. But he was also an alcoholic and a drug addict, and in the 1930s spent two years in prison for raping a ▶

Five years at the front

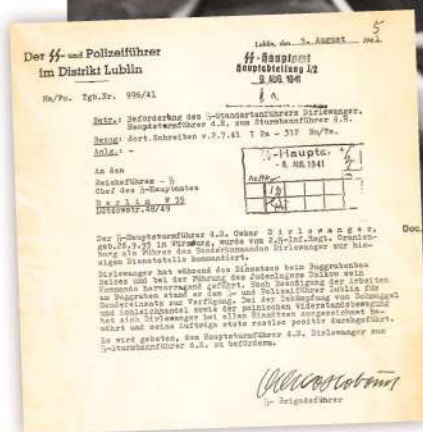
The fight against Soviet partisans was brutal and demanded death-defying men who would gladly violate all rules. Dirlewanger's penal battalion was created for fighting on and behind the front.



Dirlewanger was given free rein in the war against Soviet partisans – his methods included terror against civilians and random executions.

DIRLEWANGER

BUNDESARCHIV



Dirlewanger received plaudits for his effective methods of fighting partisans. For example, the chief of police in Lublin sent a commendation to SS headquarters.

“DIRLEWANGER WAS A NUISANCE AND A TERROR TO THE ENTIRE POPULATION”

Georg Konrad Morgen, who investigated Dirlewanger’s crimes in Lublin.

- 13-year-old girl and the attempted rape of several other minors.

Dirlewanger had already joined Hitler’s emerging Nazi Party back in 1922, and 10 years later he became one of the so-called “Brownshirts” in the SA, the Nazi stormtroopers. But even the SA, which had a reputation for being thugs, had enough of Dirlewanger’s behaviour. After his conviction he

was expelled from the Party in 1934. After serving his sentence, Dirlewanger travelled to Spain and fought in the German Condor Legion, which sided with Franco in the Spanish Civil War. But his ambition was to serve Germany again. In vain he wrote to Heinrich Himmler and begged to join the SS corps.

IT WAS ONLY with the creation of the new SS unit that Dirlewanger’s prayers were answered – thanks to his old friend Gottlob Berger. Dirlewanger and Berger knew each other from paramilitary right-wing corps that emerged just after World War I. Berger had become a general in the SS and now ►



Massacre: rebellious farmers murdered by SS soldiers

★ On 29th September, 1944, SS Major Walter Reder led his soldiers into Marzabotto near Bologna. There were rumours the small town gave help to partisans and

now its citizens would face the ultimate punishment.

In the days that followed, Marzabotto’s residents were systematically executed. 110

of the victims were under 10 years old. Today, the murders in Marzabotto are believed to have been the worst SS massacre on civilians in Western Europe.

About 770 died

Massacre in Warsaw

Thousands of innocent civilians were murdered when Dirlewanger's uncontrollable brigade was unleashed on Warsaw's streets. Within two days, around 40,000 Poles had lost their lives.

★ During the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, Oskar Dirlewanger's bloodthirsty brigade advanced at the front of the so-called Wola Massacre – the worst massacre in Polish history.

On 5th August, Dirlewanger's men stormed the Wola district of Warsaw and cold-bloodedly murdered innocent civilians. During one effort, they abused, tortured and shot 5,000 Poles. Within the space of the first two days Dirlewanger's brigade committed 40,000 murders.

The German strategy was to expose the civilian population

to so much terror that the Polish resistance would abandon the fight.

The hope was that the crackdown would help German soldiers avoid being exposed to tough street battles.

But the atrocities had the opposite effect. Polish partisans fought fiercely, and the insurgency continued for 63 days before the Poles were finally forced to give up.

Nobody knows exactly how many people died, but historians estimate that the figure was around 200,000.

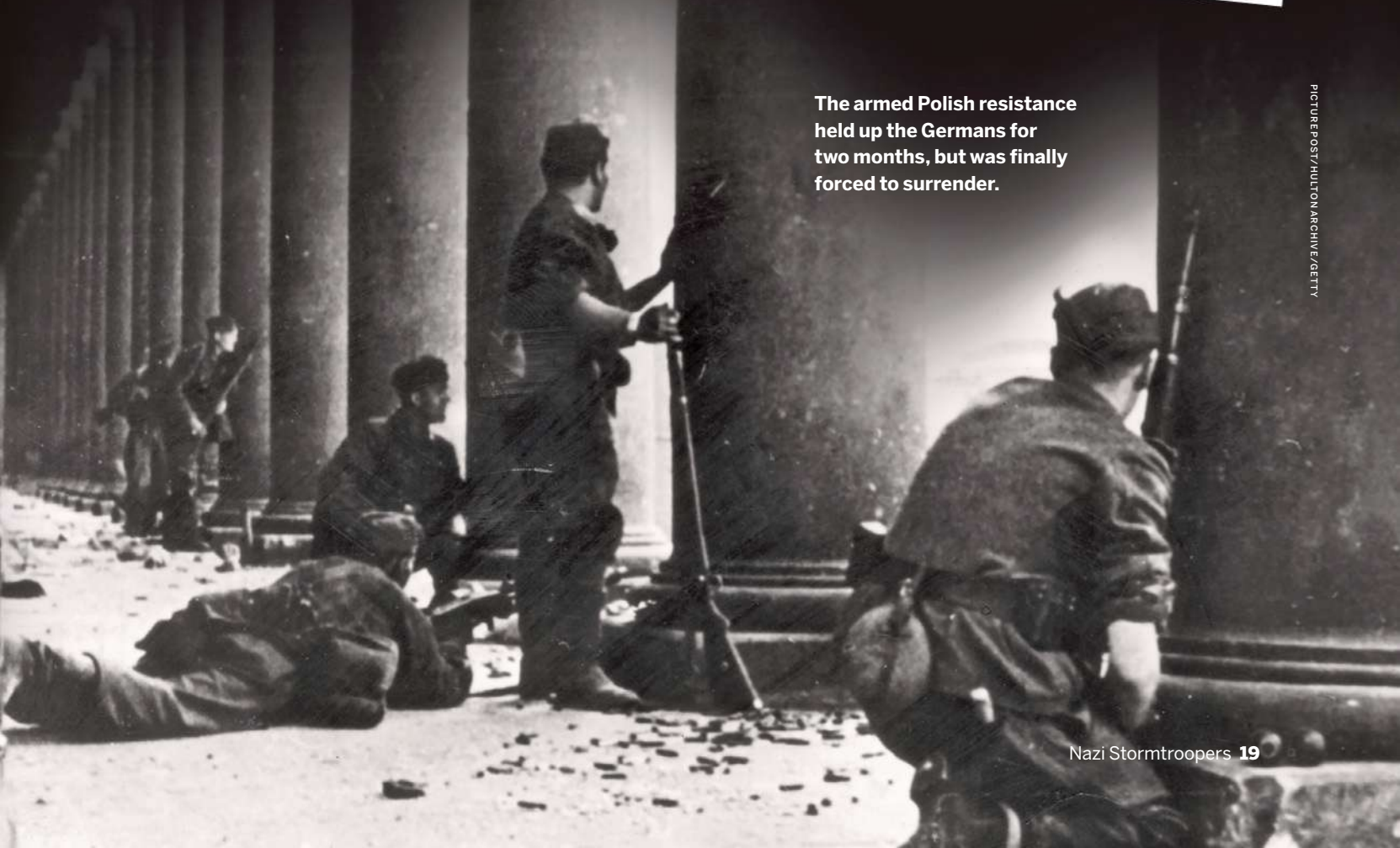


German soldiers in street battles.



In total, 200,000 people lost their lives.

The armed Polish resistance held up the Germans for two months, but was finally forced to surrender.



DIRLEWANGER

- installed his comrade as commander of the new criminal battalion.

AFTER TRAINING IN Sachsenhausen, the brigade was deployed to Poland. First stop was the border with Russia, where the soldiers built fortifications guarding a Jewish labour camp, next to the cities of Krakow and Lublin. It was in the Jewish ghetto in Lublin that Dirlewanger and his poachers first gained notoriety for killing, extorting and robbing innocent civilians. Dirlewanger would arrest Jews at random, alleging they had committed ritual murder. Unless they paid a large sum immediately, they would be shot on the spot.

“Dirlewanger was a nuisance and a terror to the entire population. He repeatedly pillaged the ghetto in Lublin, extorting ransoms”, stated lawyer Georg Konrad Morgen who the SS had sent to the General

Government part of occupied Poland to investigate a large number of charges against Dirlewanger.

The list of crimes turned out to be even more extensive than the lawyer could have imagined. For example, Morgen discovered that Dirlewanger was carrying out “scientific experiments” on young Jewish women who had been forced to undress before being injected with strychnine.

“Dirlewanger looked on, smoking a cigarette, as did his friends, and they saw how these girls were dying. Immediately after that the corpses were cut into small pieces, mixed with horse meat and boiled into soap”, Morgen said after the war.

Although Morgen reported Dirlewanger, his superiors responded by reducing Morgen’s rank and dispatching him to the Eastern Front.

Nevertheless, Dirlewanger’s behaviour once again proved too much even for the local SS. The

Bronislav Kaminski (right) began as a soldier in the Red Army, but later switched sides.

SS leaders shocked by Kaminski’s murderers

Soldiers in the Kaminski Brigade robbed, raped and murdered Polish civilians at will during the war in Warsaw.

★ Dirlewanger’s men were not the only SS soldiers who became known for their brutality during the hard fighting on the Eastern Front. The so-called Kaminski Brigade comprising Soviet defectors was equally feared. The unit was led by the brutal Bronislav Kaminski – a former Red Army soldier who had become an enemy of the communists in the 1930s and was sent to a prison camp in Siberia.

The Kaminski Brigade was primarily known for its efforts against Soviet partisan and Nazi resistance groups.

In 1944, the aggressive brigade was sent to Warsaw to help crush the uprising. There the brigade robbed,

raped and murdered civilians to such an extent that the SS leadership finally decided to pull the brigade away from the fighting. After years of cruelty on the Eastern Front, the soldiers had been transformed into a gang of drunken criminals that could no longer be controlled.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, SS leaders believed the looting was the biggest problem. When Kaminski and his soldiers kept back valuables for themselves, it was considered stealing from the Third Reich – a serious crime over and above any atrocities.

The SS chose a radical solution to the problem: the brigade was dissolved while Kaminski was taken out of Warsaw in great secrecy and then executed.

local Higher SS and Police Leader Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger called SS General Berger at his headquarters in Berlin and passed on an ultimatum:

“[Unless] this bunch of criminals disappears from the General Government within a week, I will go myself and lock them up.”

If the intention was to stop Dirlewanger, then Krüger had called the wrong man. Berger did nothing to curb his old comrade's excesses – instead, the general simply sent the commander further east to the extensive Belarusian forests to hunt Russian partisans. Here Dirlewanger would be beyond the reach of SS investigators. On these new hunting grounds, Dirlewanger and his soldiers were free to give their ugly dispositions carte blanche and kill at will. They were like a flock of wolves in a sheep pen.

FOR TWO YEARS SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger rampaged behind the front in occupied Belarus. Part of the brigade's remit was to take out partisans who destroyed German supply lines. And the commander had his own, unorthodox method for snatching them.

He would fly over villages that he suspected were sheltering resistance fighters in a reconnaissance plane. If the plane was fired at, he'd return with his soldiers and burn the village to the ground. No prisoners were taken during the occupation – men, women and children alike were all killed.

Other times, Dirlewanger collected together women and children left behind by the partisans and forced them to pass through minefields that protected the Belarusian positions. The SS chief made no distinction between civilians and resistance fighters, and wherever his men turned up, murder, rape and pillage were all on the agenda.

In Germany the Nazi leadership did nothing to stop or slow the barbarism, which according to some historians cost at least 120,000 Belarusians their lives. On the contrary, Adolf Hitler issued a decree in January 1943 stating that German soldiers could not be prosecuted for acts committed during anti-partisan operations. Dirlewanger had officially been given free rein.

During one operation, Dirlewanger's men surrounded a small town and ordered all 2,500

“DR DIRLEWANGER WAS HARDLY A GOOD BOY... BUT HE WAS A GOOD SOLDIER”

SS General Gottlob Berger, who supported Dirlewanger on several occasions.

inhabitants – men, women and children – into large barns. Then Dirlewanger came forward to personally issue the death sentence: “Shoot immediately!” The door of the first barn was opened and the soldiers emptied their machine gun magazines into the crowds. They then moved swiftly to the next barn and repeated the action. Finally, the soldiers closed the barn doors and set them alight.

Any who managed to exit the barns – several with burning clothes – were shot immediately.

Even in the lawless guerrilla war, Dirlewanger's actions sparked disgust – despite having Hitler's personal blessing.

Such was the case when – for example – in March 1943 the Dirlewanger Brigade participated in action against partisans alongside other SS troops. Officially, the offensive took the lives of around 9,800 partisans, with 6,000 apprehended.

Once again, Dirlewanger's men led the way in brutality. When a German propaganda officer travelled around the area after the fighting, he reported that some partisans had been burned alive while others had been eaten by wild boar.

Wilhelm Kube, who was Commissioner General of Belarus, protested, but again guardian angel Berger intervened. The general dismissed the criticism as nonsense and stated that Dirlewanger was actually quite decent – considering the circumstances.

IN JUNE 1943 Dirlewanger had 760 men under him, but the battalion constantly required fresh blood. Casualties were far higher than in other SS units – it wasn't without reason that the brigade was nicknamed the “Ascension Commandos”.

The number of suitable poachers gradually dwindled, forcing the recruitment base to be ►



Emblem of the 36th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS, which became the SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger.



Massacre: Germans burned the French to death

★ On the morning of 10th June, 1944 the SS received information that one of its officers was being held captive by partisans in a local village. A few hours later,

a German battalion surrounded Oradour-sur-Glane and gathered all the inhabitants. The men were forced into six barns where they were shot. Then the barns were

burned down. Women and children were chased into the church. The Germans threw a fire bomb into the church and shot dead any who tried to escape.

About 642 died

DIRLEWANGER

► expanded. Dirlewanger started receiving court-martialled SS troops, Russian deserters and a variety of convicted criminals from prisons to swell his brigade's depleted ranks.

In February 1944, Heinrich Himmler granted Dirlewanger permission to hand-pick up to 800 men from the "anti-socials and the career criminals" who'd been interned in German concentration camps. The battalion's new recruits now included murderers, rapists, child abusers and the mentally ill among their number.

IT WAS WITH a certain amount of pride that Himmler mentioned Dirlewanger and his soldiers in a speech to local Nazis in Poland in 1944:

"I said to Dirlewanger, 'Now, why not look for suitable candidates among the villains, the real criminals, in the concentration camps?'"

Himmler placed particular emphasis on the battalion's discipline:

"The atmosphere in the regiment is often somewhat medieval in the use of corporal punishment... If someone pulls a face when asked whether we will win the war or not, he will slump down... dead, because the others will have shot him out of hand."

No form of disobedience was tolerated. Rule breakers were usually punished by being beaten with clubs or at worst shot.

One particularly feared punishment was the so-called Dirlewanger coffin. Here, the victim was forced to stand upright in a cramped, closed box for days. According to the soldiers, the victim came out either a dead man or a merciless killer.

The harsh penalties were designed to force the soldiers to obey blindly and show courage and fearlessness at all times. In December 1943, Dirlewanger even issued an order that cowardice in battle would be punished by death.

During the uprising in Warsaw in 1944, 18-year-old Mathias Schenk experienced the battalion's alcohol-infused bravado up close when it was brought in to support his unit.

Shortly before, the men had been withdrawn from Belarus once the Red Army had recaptured it and were instead deployed to Warsaw. The soldiers' attitude remained the same despite the fact the

unit had been redesignated SS-Sonderregiment Dirlewanger: concentrated ferocity and blood lust.

During the first week of the Warsaw Uprising, Germans killed between 40,000 and 50,000 Poles – most of them in the Wola district where Dirlewanger's men roamed. With no regard for their victims' age or gender, the men murdered and raped their way through Warsaw's old town where – according to eyewitness reports – the unit set fire to prisoners, impaled infants on bayonets and hung women from balconies.

After a few days of fighting, Schenk came under the Dirlewanger's command. Here, with his fellow soldiers, he learned to drink vodka on an empty stomach every morning, so he was suitably anaesthetised before the fighting began.

OUT IN THE field, Schenk was placed in the front line where he had to blast doors and remove obstacles so Dirlewanger's men could move in. One day the soldiers forced their way into a room where wounded Poles and Germans lay side by side, cared for by a single doctor and 15 nurses.

The wounded Germans begged the SS soldiers to spare the Poles, but their pleas fell on deaf ears, and the Poles had their heads smashed in with rifle butts. The battalion then tore the clothes off the nurses. That same evening, Schenk watched the naked and battered nurses with hands over their heads and blood running down their legs being led to the gallows, which was set up in an open space. Dirlewanger himself laughed before kicking the bricks away from under one of the nurses.

After two months, the uprising in Warsaw had been crushed. 200,000 Poles had died while SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger had lost 2,700 men – the majority were new recruits from an SS penal camp that had been brought in during the uprising. Schenk had seen enough. In the winter of 1944-45 he deserted and Polish peasants helped him to hide in a horse stable until the war was over. "Why did they save me? I have never learned why. Out of mercy, probably. I looked like a beaten kid", he recounted many years later.

After Warsaw, Dirlewanger's troops were sent to Slovakia to crush another uprising, and in the spring of 1945 returned to Germany before taking part in



Dirlewanger (left) in conversation with some officers.



Massacre: civilians were victims of Hitler's revenge

★ In 1942, Gestapo chief Reinhard Heydrich was assassinated by Czech resistance fighters in Prague. Hitler's reprisal was based on a false rumour that claimed the

perpetrators originated from the village of Lidice. A few days later Lidice burnt down, all its men shot, the women sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp and most

children gassed in mobile gas units. In the weeks that followed, another town was destroyed and many Czechs were randomly selected and murdered in revenge.

About 1,300 died



the final, decisive battles against the advancing Red Army. Dirlewanger escaped retribution at the hands of the Russians, but his days were numbered. In early June 1945 he was captured in southern Germany. His route here isn't known. Dirlewanger was taken custody by French forces, but his guards were Poles.

How much the prison guards knew about Oskar Dirlewanger's crimes is uncertain, but according to a fellow inmate, the Poles beat the German so thoroughly that by the morning of 5th June, 1945 he was unable to speak or move. Officially, Dirlewanger was pronounced dead two days later.

His guardian angel, Gottlob Berger, could no longer protect him. During the Nuremberg trials, Berger was confronted with his old friend's atrocities: "Dr Dirlewanger was hardly a good boy... But he was a good soldier", said Berger. Berger was sentenced to 25 years in prison for crimes against humanity, but was pardoned in 1951.

Schenk returned to Belgium, where he started a family and had four children. He organised emergency aid to Poland and met with veterans from the uprising in Warsaw. ★

Esben Sylvest is a military historian.

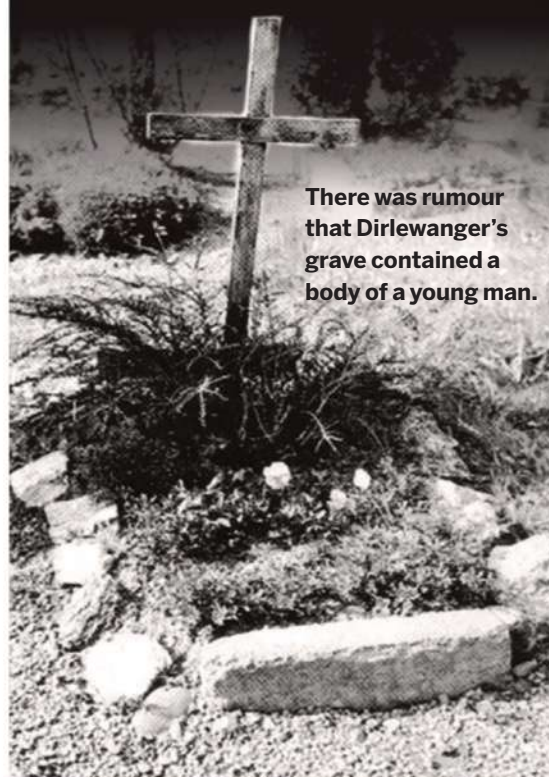
Further reading:
The Cruel Hunters (1998) by French MacLean
 ★ **The SS Dirlewanger Brigade** (2011) by Christian Ingrao.

Dirlewanger's body was dug up

★ After World War II, rumours persisted that Oskar Dirlewanger had survived the war – despite eyewitness accounts claiming the opposite. It was alleged that he and several other leading Nazis had escaped to Egypt, and there was a rumour that a completely different corpse was in Dirlewanger's grave in Altshausen.

In 1960, German authorities decided to open Dirlewanger's grave to see what was actually there. Günther Weyrich, a professor at the forensic institute at the University of Freiburg, identified the body in the coffin as Oskar Dirlewanger from its length and the war wounds found on it.

But the professor's examination did not dampen the rumours. On the contrary, Israeli historian Michael Bar-Zohar claimed that the body of the grave belonged to a young man with gunshot wounds and that Dirlewanger had entered the Foreign Legion after the war. US writer Glenn B Infield has also claimed that Dirlewanger had moved to Egypt and that he worked for the Egyptian army. However, it has not been possible to confirm these claims.



There was rumour that Dirlewanger's grave contained a body of a young man.

FRENCH MACLEAN

SS CHIEF HEINRICH HIMMLER

TERROR CAMPA

**"THE SS WAS NAZI
GERMANY'S MOST
IMPORTANT TERROR
ORGANISATION"**

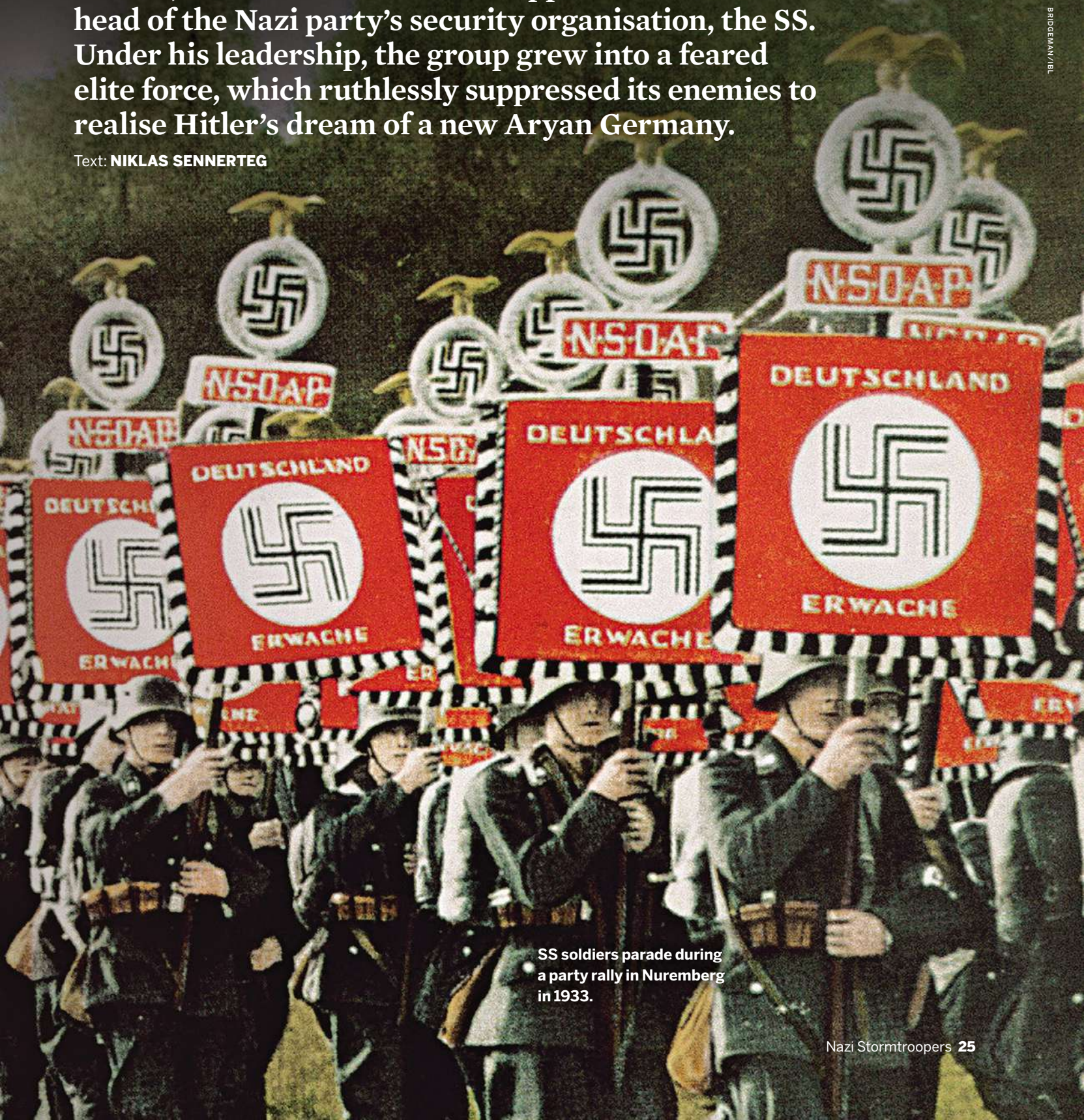
Heinrich Himmler was the
head of the SS from 1929
to 1945.

CORBIS/GETTY

IGN IN EUROPE

In 1929, Heinrich Himmler was appointed as the new head of the Nazi party's security organisation, the SS. Under his leadership, the group grew into a feared elite force, which ruthlessly suppressed its enemies to realise Hitler's dream of a new Aryan Germany.

Text: NIKLAS SENNERTEG



SS soldiers parade during a party rally in Nuremberg in 1933.

HIMMLER – MASTER OF EXTERMINATION

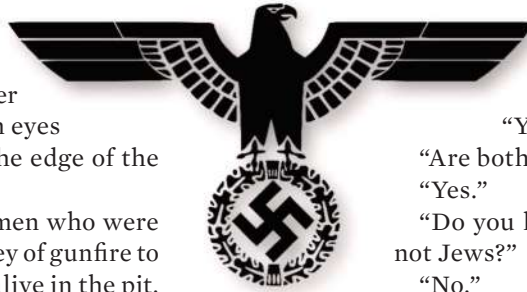
The smartly dressed man with the death head badge on his uniform cap had never seen a corpse with his own eyes before. That's why he bent over the edge of the mass grave to take a closer look.

At that moment, a group of SS men who were standing by the hole let loose a volley of gunfire to finish off the Jews who were still alive in the pit. Brain matter from one of the victims splattered on to the spectator's uniform.

The man swayed and began to shake as if he were about to vomit. An adjutant quickly steadied him and led him away from the terrible scene.

It was 15th August, 1941, less than two months after the German invasion of the Soviet Union had begun. The nauseated man was none other than SS leader Reichsführer Heinrich Luitpold Himmler, who'd been instructing his underlings to use ruthless force against the enemies of the Third Reich for many years.

During a visit to the city of Minsk, which had recently been captured by the Germans, Himmler had asked to watch a mass killing. Gruppenführer Arthur Nebe, chief of Einsatzgruppe B (Belarus) – one of the paramilitary death squads sent to the Soviet Union to follow the advancing German troops – arranged an execution of 98 men and two women for his special guest. Just before the execution began, Himmler went to one of the victims, a tall young man that



SS cracked down on all opposition to the Nazi party.



Hitler's driver Julius Schreck.

Himmler considered too blond to be a Jew.

"Are you a Jew?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Are both your parents Jews?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any other ancestors who were not Jews?"

"No."

"Then I can't help you," he said coolly, terminating the conversation.

The sickening scene Himmler had just witnessed was not enough for his resolve to falter even a single inch. No matter how awful it was, they had to carry out their orders. He could not let them fail to do it. In the name of the *Tausendjähriges Reich* (Thousand-Year Reich) they had to be hard and determined, Himmler stressed.

THE SS WAS NAZI GERMANY'S most important terror organisation. It oversaw the mass murder of six million Jews along with the persecution and execution of millions of others who did not conform to Nazi political, religious or racist ideals. The organisation was responsible for a wide range of activities, including espionage, the colonisation of conquered territories and conducting medical experiments on prisoners. The SS also operated businesses, industries and orphanages, developed new farming methods, and researched the origins of the German and Aryan peoples. In addition, it had a military wing, the Waffen-SS, which served the party's needs at home in Germany and fought on the front line during World War II. The SS worked outside the law and independently of other authorities; in practice it was a state within the state.

SS – an abbreviation of *Schutzstaffel*, German for "protection squad" – had its roots in Hitler's personal bodyguard. In the early 1920s, Adolf Hitler had 21 bodyguards who were tasked with protecting him during the brawls that frequently broke out at Nazi party gatherings. After a failed Nazi coup in Munich during 1923, Hitler ended up in prison and the Nazi party was banned. When Hitler was released from Landsberg Prison in the mid 1920s and resumed running the Nazi party, he instructed his driver, former actor Julius Schreck, to organise a new bodyguard. This group formed the basis of the SS.

Four years later, Hitler appointed an energetic party official named Heinrich Himmler as the new chairman of the SS. Working tirelessly, Himmler boosted its numbers from 280 members to 52,000 by the end of 1932. A year later, the SS had more than 200,000 men at its disposal.

To help him, Himmler had Reinhard Tristan Eugen Heydrich, a naval officer and notorious womaniser



SS recruits are shown different types of swastikas and SS runes.

SZPHOTO/IBL

This SA brigade marches through Berlin in 1932.



SZ PHOTO/IEI

“IN THE NAME OF THE THOUSAND-YEAR REICH THEY HAD TO BE... DETERMINED”

who had been fired for “conduct unbecoming to an officer and a gentleman” for a scandal involving a lady. In 1931, Himmler tasked him with organising the Nazi party’s own intelligence service, which soon became known as *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD). Over the years that followed, Heydrich became the architect of the Nazis’ terror apparatus.

DESPITE ITS RAPIDLY GROWING membership, the SS was only a small force compared to Hitler’s ‘party army’, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), during its early years. This organisation was led by the former army captain, Ernst Julius Günther Röhm. While the SA’s brown-clad, unruly brawlers broke up the meetings of other parties, caused pandemonium on the streets and mistreated political opponents, the SS was a more disciplined organisation and served as the party’s own police force. Himmler wanted the SS to become an elite force, the nobility of the new Nazi empire. He expected the members to ▶



Heinrich Himmler and Hermann Göring shake hands under the swastika.

HILTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES



After Hitler's power grab in 1933, the SA rounded up opponents of Nazism.

► embody the Nazi super-human ideal. The admission requirements were, therefore, very strict. The applicant had to be a healthy and strong male aged 25-35, over 170cm tall and possessing an Aryan appearance. In addition, every applicant had to provide two witnesses who were willing to vouch for his honesty and good character.

SS men were schooled to believe in the Nazis' racist ideology and to obey all orders blindly. The ideal SS man, according to Himmler, was a gentleman with a clean record who, on command, was boundlessly brutal against the Nazi's enemies and who would not hesitate to sacrifice his own life.

Himmler set up detailed provisions to regulate the conduct of his men. For instance, SS men who

wanted to marry had to have their choice of bride approved by Himmler personally. The woman's family tree was examined to confirm whether she was of 'good race'. Finally, the SS leader would look at a photo of the man's intended and if he didn't like what he saw, there was no wedding.

HIMMLER SHROUDED THE SS in secrecy and sanctioned mysterious rites to enhance the organisation's image as an exclusive order. In the 1930s, SS men adopted their iconic black uniforms with the death head (*totenkopf*) emblem on the cap and the SS runes (*siegrune*) on the collar. The SS motto "*Meine Ehre heißt Treue*" – my honour is loyalty – emphasised which qualities were valued highest, and Hitler called Himmler "The faithful Heinrich" because of his unswerving loyalty.

When the Nazis took power in 1933, it triggered a wave of terror and persecution against the party's political opponents. Many were thrown into the SA's improvised camps. Himmler failed to land any of the newly vacant government posts. Instead, he was made a chief of police in Bavaria. There he

"HIMMLER SHROUDED THE SS IN SECRECY AND SANCTIONED MYSTERIOUS RITES TO ENHANCE THE ORGANISATION'S IMAGE AS AN EXCLUSIVE ORDER"

established a political police force under Heydrich's leadership. Its goal was to pursue the party's opponents. In parallel, Göring created his own secret police – the Gestapo – in Germany's largest state, Prussia. The Gestapo was later integrated into the SS's extensive security network.

In the same year in Bavaria, Dachau opened. It was the SS's first concentration camp. Officially, Dachau existed to politically re-educate the party's 'wrong-headed' opponents so that they could be integrated into the new Nazi society. In reality, everyday life in the camp was about terror, abuse and death. Dachau was used as a model for subsequent German concentration camps.

The Nazi power takeover also heralded an internal power struggle within the party. SA chief Röhm was dissatisfied with the role given to his brown shirts. He believed that they deserved a more prominent role in the emerging Nazi state. To the consternation of the conservative generals in the Wehrmacht, Röhm insisted on becoming Minister of War and transforming the SA into a People's Army. But Röhm wasn't simply opposed by senior officers in the Wehrmacht: behind the scenes, Hitler was being fed false information by Himmler, Heydrich and Göring who claimed that Röhm was planning a coup d'état.

ON 30TH JUNE, 1934, Himmler and Göring led SS groups and police forces in an action to eliminate the SA's leadership and other inconvenient political opponents. The total number of victims of the so-called Night of the Long Knives is unknown, but it's likely that hundreds were arrested, including Röhm.

As a reward for this action, the SS finally gained the status of an independent organisation, which opened the door for Himmler's ambitions. In the years that followed, he cemented his position as the head of Hitler's security forces. In 1934, he became responsible for the Gestapo, and two years later became chief of police throughout Germany. At the same time, he appointed Heydrich to lead the Gestapo and the Kripo, the criminal police force. The pair could now throw anyone into a concentration camp for an indefinite period without trial. Himmler and Heydrich continued to build up the security network, determined to break any and all internal resistance. During World War II, the SS's sphere of influence grew as Hitler handed it responsibility for implementing key Nazi goals, such as enacting the party's Lebensraum policy in Eastern Europe. Hitler and Himmler dreamed of creating a giant German empire by using Aryan Germans to colonise a vast swathe of Eastern Europe stretching from the German border to the Ural mountains.

The Slavic people who lived there would be eliminated or driven from their lands. As part of the ►

Heinrich Himmler (1900–45)

UPBRINGING

Raised in a conservative, middle-class family in Munich. Joined the army in 1918, but was unable to get to the front before World War I was over. Studied agronomy after the war.

CAREER

Became a member of the Nazi Party in 1923. He worked as one of the party's foremost propagandists before being appointed as leader of the SS with the rank of Reichsführer-SS in 1929. In 1933, Himmler became a police chief in Bavaria, in 1934, the chief of Gestapo, in 1936, the chief of the German police force and in 1939, Commissioner for the Strengthening of German Nationhood. In 1943, Himmler became Minister of the Interior, in 1944 he was appointed head of the German reserve forces, Plenipotentiary General for Administration and commander of an army group on the Western Front. Finally, in 1945, Himmler became the commander of an army group on the Eastern Front, and responsible for organizing a Nazi militia unit (Werewolf), but it only existed on paper. That same year, Himmler committed suicide in British captivity.



Himmler at the peak of his career (1), as a 7-year-old (2), as a brigadier (3) and with his wife and child (4).



FAMILY

Married Margarethe Siegroth in 1929 and had a daughter the same year. He also adopted a son. He also had another two children through an extramarital affair with secretary Hedwig Potthast.



The SS and Gestapo secret police built a comprehensive system of controls to eradicate all opposition to the Nazi party.



The Nazi party launched a boycott of Jewish shops in 1933.

► invasion of the Soviet Union, Himmler and other Nazi leaders predicted that 20 to 30 million Soviet citizens would starve to death, partly because the Nazis intended to block food supplies. A select number of the 'subordinated' Slavic people would be allowed to remain as a cheap labour force.

THE WORST CRIME associated with the SS was the persecution and attempted genocide of the Jewish people, or what the Nazis liked to euphemistically term "The Final Solution".

Jewish persecution began as soon as the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933. Using threats, acts of terror and new laws, the Jews were quickly deprived of their positions, property and citizenship.

In January 1939, Heydrich was commissioned to 'solve' the Jewish question by means of forced migration, but this plan was thwarted as most countries closed their borders to Jewish refugees. Himmler sent in four paramilitary death squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*, during the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. The 3,000 men in the squads were charged with the assassination of Jews, Romas, communists and others deemed undesirable by the Nazis. During the first year of the campaign, an estimated one million people were killed in the mass murders, including those witnessed by Himmler in Minsk in August 1941.

In the autumn of that year, Hitler commissioned Himmler to proceed with the extermination of all Jews throughout Europe.

The SS conducted research projects to prove that the Aryan breed was superior to the rest of humanity. Here a woman's head is being measured during one such test.



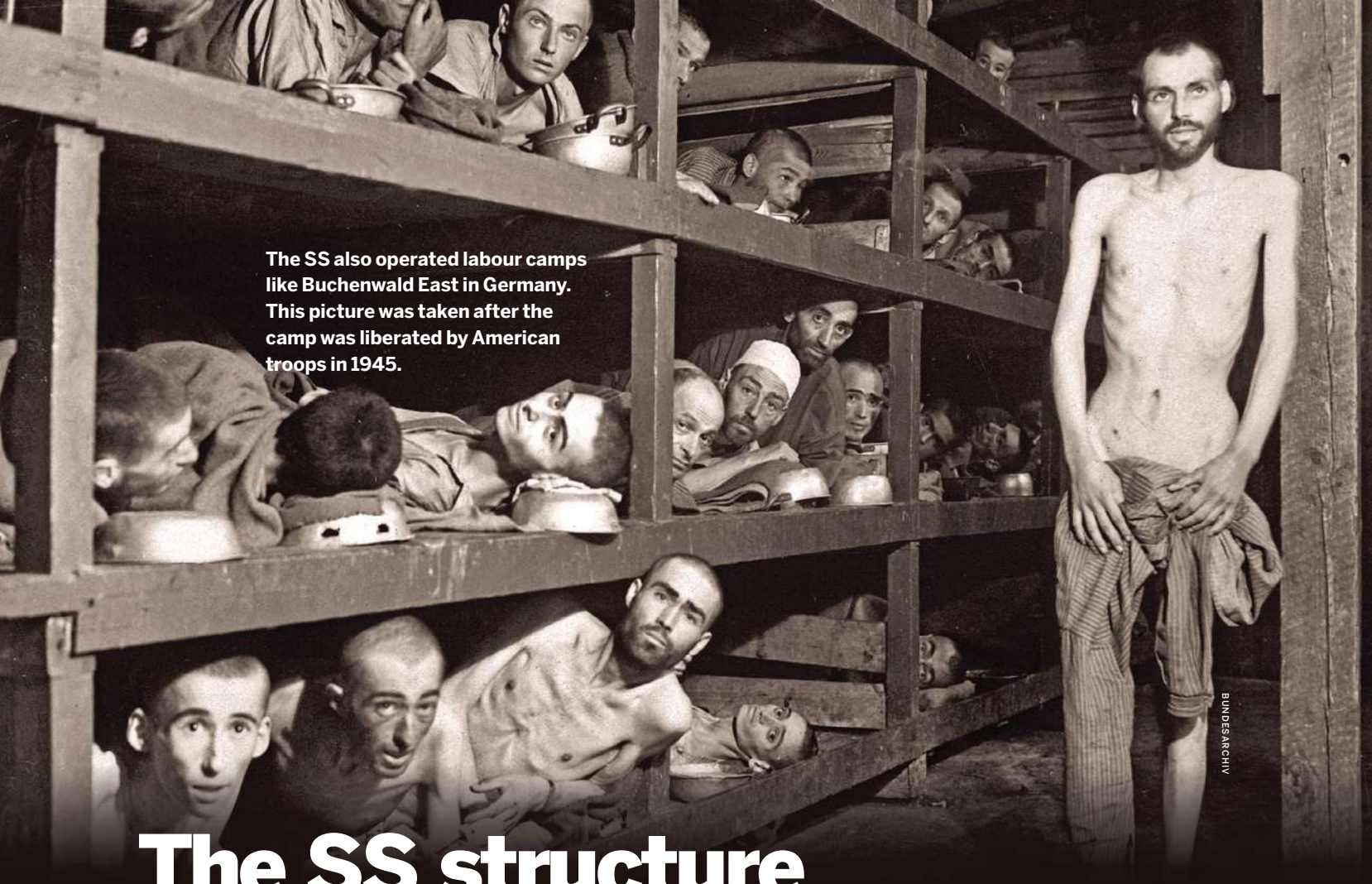
In 1942, the trains began to feed death camps that had been especially fitted with gas chambers. The camps were hidden in relatively remote locations in occupied Poland. One, Auschwitz-Birkenau soon became the leading death factory, where Jews were killed en masse with the cyanide-based poison Zyklon B. The camp was so efficient that the Nazis centralised their efforts and held all gas executions there. Other camps in Eastern Europe – Treblinka, Chelmno and Sobibor – were closed one by one.

Even though the programme of annihilation was kept secret and camouflaged as 'evacuation' and 'relocation', information and rumours about what was happening – both in Germany and in the outside world – soon spread. With a desire to keep accurate records, SS bureaucrats documented the cold-blooded killings and many of these documents were discovered after the war.

By this time, German society had been mobilised for war. Many workers were summoned to serve at the front, which led to a lack of labour in the armament factories. Himmler decided that those prisoners who could work, should work and began renting out prison workforces to industrialists, like Krupp and IG Farben.

Small-scale concentration camps were established alongside the factories.

For many of these sick and emaciated prisoners, working in such a camp simply meant a more protracted death than if ►



The SS also operated labour camps like Buchenwald East in Germany. This picture was taken after the camp was liberated by American troops in 1945.

BUNDESARCHIV

The SS structure

The SS was a complicated bureaucratic organisation. It was divided into three main branches:

ALLGEMEINE-SS

Around one third of Allgemeine-SS personnel worked full time in an SS office, drew a salary and had a rank. Most people who served in the SS's other organisations or state-controlled authorities also held a rank within the Allgemeine-SS.

WAFFEN-SS

The Waffen-SS became an independent military force with its own high command in 1940. It brought together a conglomerate of SS armed paramilitary and police forces.

SS-TODENKOPFVERBANDE

This force, made up of the so-called Death Head units,



consisted of concentration camp guards. From 1938, personnel were rotated between camp duty and service in the

field. Able-bodied guards were stationed on the front line, while those who were no longer fit for duty were used at the camps.





Jews from the liquidated Warsaw ghetto were rounded up and taken to concentration camps following their uprising in 1943.

► they had been delivered to a gas chamber. According to the affidavit of Dr Wilhelm Jaeger, the senior doctor for the Krupp slaves, “The Tartars and Kyrgyz suffered most; they collapsed like flies [from] bad housing, the poor quality and insufficient quantity of food, overwork and insufficient rest... At times the water supply at the camps was shut off for periods of from eight to 14 days.”

The camps also became a resource for doctors who wanted to carry out medical experiments — often with fatal results. Most notorious were the terrible experiments performed on children by Joseph Mengele, camp doctor at Auschwitz.

HIMMLER’S POWER CONTINUED to grow during the war. In 1943 he was appointed Minister of the Interior, and in 1944 he became responsible for all prisoners of war and for the training of men and officers destined for the Wehrmacht.

Military setbacks started to pile up, however, and the Third Reich was close to falling. Towards the end of the war Himmler organised the *Volkssturm*, a militia force consisting of young boys and old men. It proved to be worthless because it lacked training, modern weapons and suitable commanders.

During the final months of the war, Hitler handed over command of Germany’s vast armed forces to Himmler. Not surprisingly, the SS boss, who lacked military experience, proved inept as a commander.

Himmler withdrew to a sanatorium with his mistress in the final weeks of the war. Behind

Hitler’s back, he tried to broker a peace with the British and American governments using the Swedish diplomat Count Folke Bernadotte as a go-between. When this was revealed, Hitler dismissed “the faithful Heinrich” and branded him a traitor.

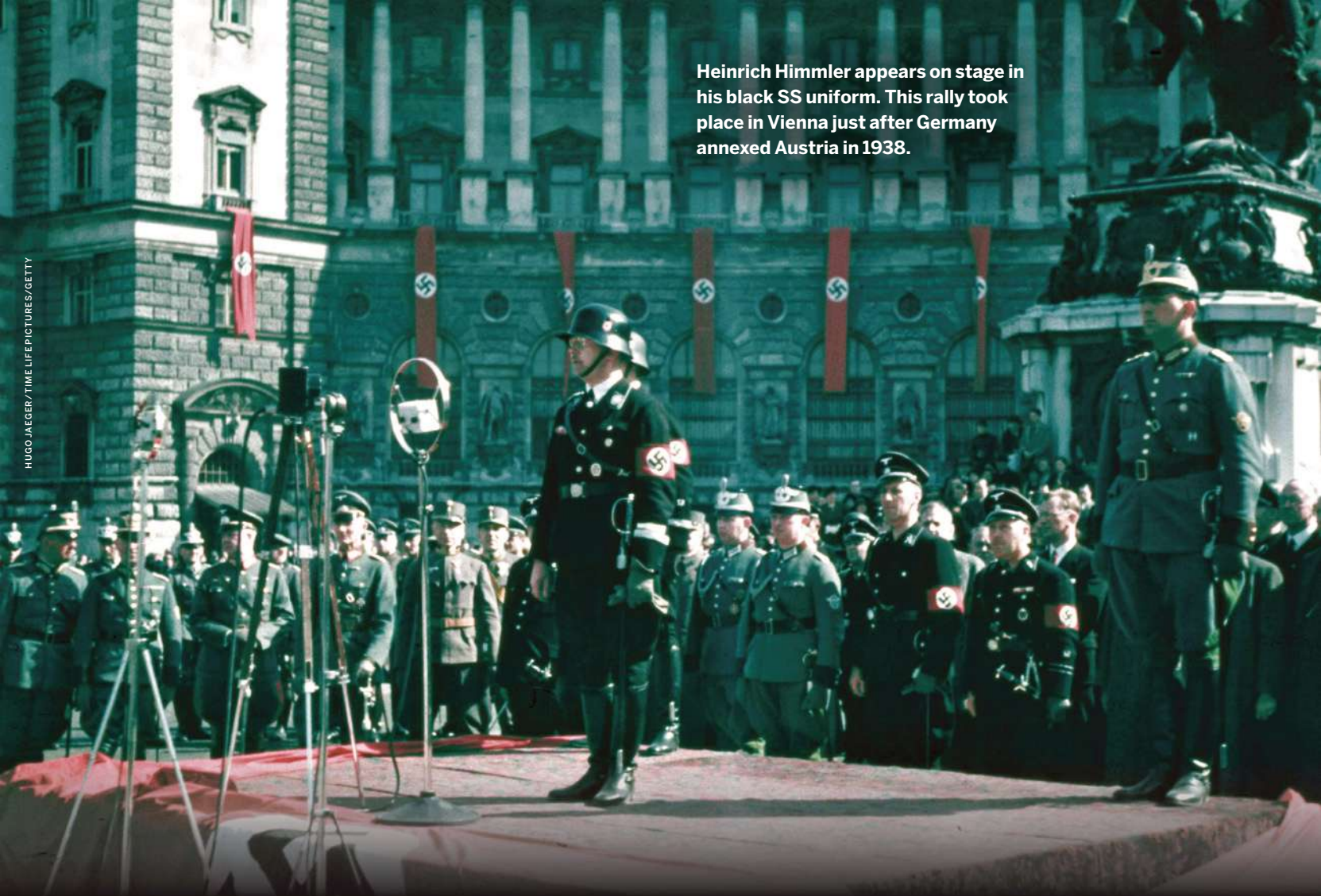
The next day, Hitler committed suicide and the war was all but over. Hunted by the Allies, Himmler went on the run in the hope of escaping justice, but he was caught at a checkpoint a few weeks later. Having admitted his real identity and knowing that only death and disgrace awaited him, Himmler bit down on a cyanide capsule that was hidden in his mouth and was dead 15 minutes later.

DURING THE NUREMBERG WAR TRIALS of 1945 and 1946, the entire SS was declared to be a criminal organisation, automatically making all its members criminals, but while many SS leaders were convicted of both war crimes and other violations by the Allied and West German courts after the war, most former SS men went on to live normal lives in West Germany, Austria or elsewhere, without ever being prosecuted. For example, of the 7,000 SS men who served at Auschwitz, fewer than 800 were ever investigated or charged by the authorities. 🇺🇸

Niklas Sennerteg is a military historian.

Further reading: *Hitler’s Henchmen* (2005) by Guido Knopp ★ *Heinrich Himmler* (2012) by Peter Longerich ★ *The SS: A New History* (2010) by Adrian Weale

Heinrich Himmler appears on stage in his black SS uniform. This rally took place in Vienna just after Germany annexed Austria in 1938.



Himmler's top-secret speech

★ Excerpt from a secret speech that Himmler gave to SS generals in the city of Posen in Poland on 4th October, 1943:

"I also want to talk to you, quite frankly, on a very grave matter. Among ourselves it should be

mentioned quite frankly, and yet we will never speak of it publicly.

"I mean the clearing out of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish race. It's one of those things it is easy to talk about – 'The Jewish race is being exterminated', says one party member, 'that's quite clear, it's in our programme – elimination of the Jews, and we're doing it,

"THE JEWISH RACE IS BEING EXTERMINATED"

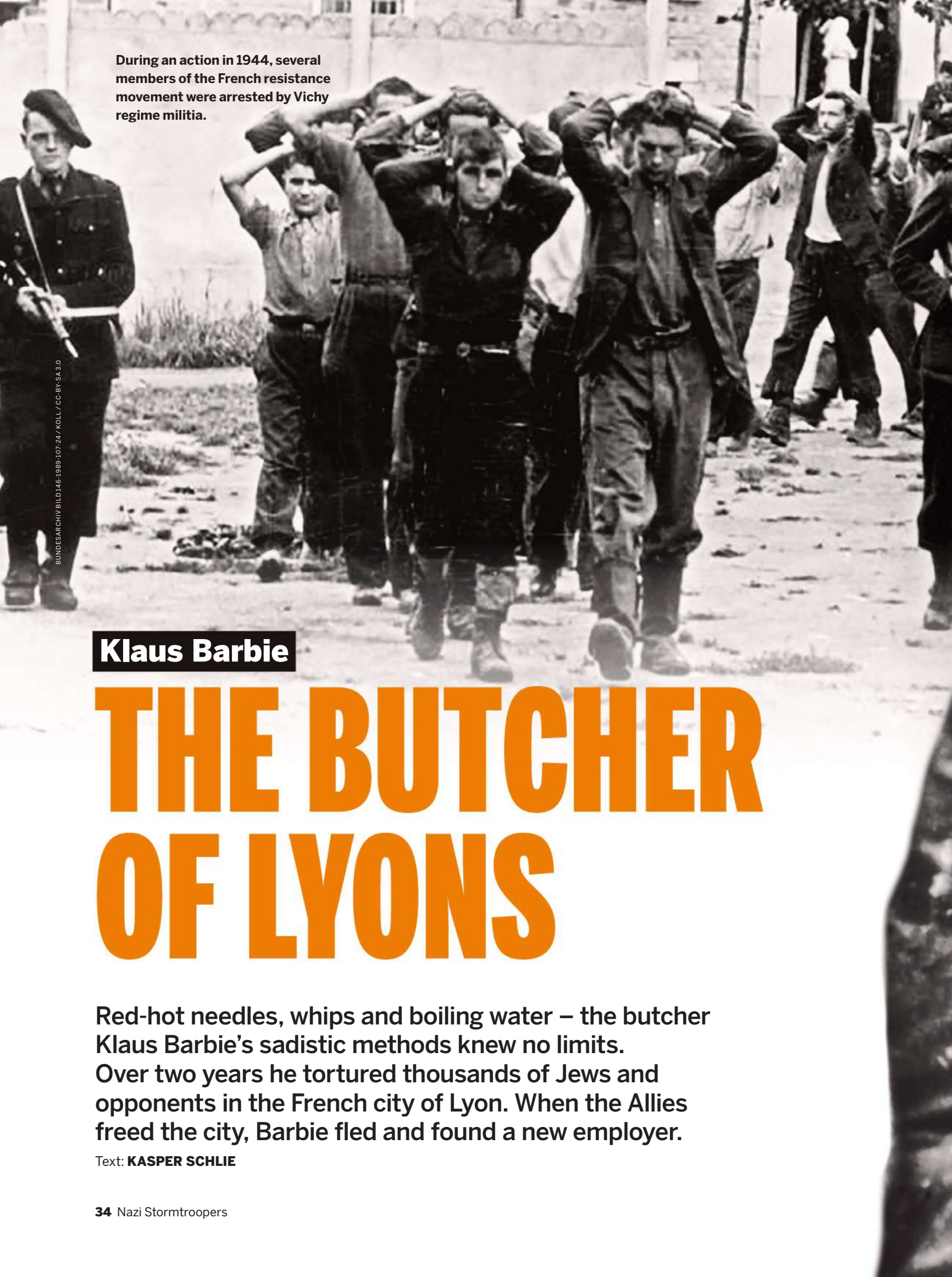
exterminating them.' And then they come, 80 million worthy Germans, and each one has his decent Jew. Of course the others are vermin, but this one is an A-1

Jew. Not one of all those who talk this way has witnessed it, not one of them has been through it. Most

of you must know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, or 500 or 1,000. To have stuck it out and at the same time – apart from exceptions caused by human weakness – to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be."



Extermination camps were scattered throughout Poland and Belarus run by Totenkopf-SS forces.



During an action in 1944, several members of the French resistance movement were arrested by Vichy regime militia.

BUNDESARCHIV BILD 146-1989-107-24 / KOLL / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Klaus Barbie

THE BUTCHER OF LYONS

Red-hot needles, whips and boiling water – the butcher Klaus Barbie's sadistic methods knew no limits. Over two years he tortured thousands of Jews and opponents in the French city of Lyon. When the Allies freed the city, Barbie fled and found a new employer.

Text: **KASPER SCHLIE**



**“AT THE GESTAPO’S
HEADQUARTERS ON
THE THIRD FLOOR OF
HOTEL TERMINUS, THE
MESSAGE WAS CLEAR:
I CAME TO KILL”**

GABRIEL HACKETT/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

After World War II, Barbie worked for the British and US intelligence services before going underground in Bolivia in 1955. Here he is wearing German uniform in 1944.



German officers in occupied Lyon in 1942. In the background, you can see Gestapo chief Klaus Barbie.

Just a single lamp cast a pale light over Suite 68 of Hotel Terminus at Lyon train station. Jewish scientist Marcel Gompel sat on a wooden chair in the middle of the floor.

Gompel had ended up in the clutches of Klaus Barbie, infamous local Gestapo chief. The 29-year-old Nazi had beaten Gompel with clubs and pushed his head under water until his lungs were bursting. But Gompel had not given the German anything but his steely gaze, so Barbie played his trump card.

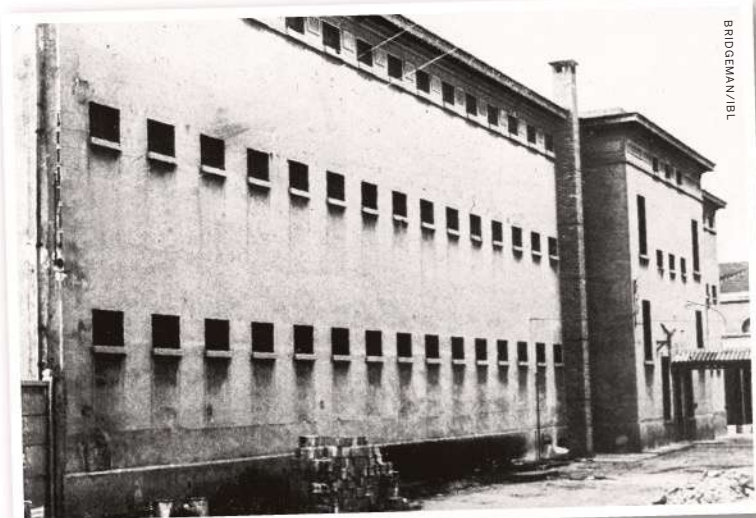
An assistant attached chains to the prisoner's ankles and using a pulley fixed to the ceiling

he hoisted Gompel so the victim was hanging upside down. The assistant picked up a knife and systematically cut the scientist's skin for several hours. His screams did not reach the street outside.

But Barbie was not happy. A bathtub was filled with a sharp-smelling chemical concoction, and on the order of the Gestapo chief, Gompel was lowered into the tub. He moaned and writhed, and when he passed out, Barbie revived the victim by pouring boiling water on his mutilated body so the interrogation could continue. For three days after the interrogation, Gompel wandered among his terrified fellow inmates. The pain was so intense that he could neither sit or lie down. When he eventually died, the other prisoners held hands and sang the *Marseillaise*.

Simply the word Gestapo, the name of the Nazi secret police, brought every Jew or resistance fighter in the occupied territories out in a cold sweat. The police flouted the rules of the Geneva Convention and continued to use increasingly tortuous methods. In Lyon, a man emerged who was so much more than anything Gestapo chief Henrich Himmler could have hoped for. Klaus Barbie was the most brutal Gestapo executioner of all.

WHEN BARBIE WAS BORN in 1913, there was nothing that suggested he would be anything but a regular, lawful citizen. His parents Anna and Nikolaus Barbie were Catholics and well-liked teachers in the small town of Udler, south of Bonn. Barbie was perceived by most as a pleasant and



Montluc prison where Klaus Barbie incarcerated thousands of resistance members and Jews.

smart boy who chatted happily with the people he met.

WORLD WAR I broke the family idyll. His father came back after a prolonged captivity in France – a country he began to hate fervently. He was traumatised after the fighting, and had shrapnel in his neck. He tried to bury the terrible memories with alcohol and began to abuse his wife and both sons. Therefore, Barbie found it as a great relief when he was sent to boarding school in Trier in 1923. His diligence and intelligence meant he planned to study theology at university.

But then came the fatal year of 1933. First, the Nazis took power in Germany, and in June Barbie's younger brother died from illness. When his alcoholic father died, Barbie went into a deep

“IN 1913 THERE WAS NO SIGN THAT HE WOULD BE ANYTHING BUT A REGULAR, LAWFUL CITIZEN”

depression. On top of everything else, he'd have to forget his expensive plans for further study. Barbie had been born illegitimately, and in a very conservative Germany he did not inherit a single mark. His future looked particularly bleak.

THE YOUNG and intelligent Barbie soon found his way into another career. After two years as a fanatic member of *HitlerJugend* – the Hitler Youth – he was admitted to the SS intelligence service SD in ▶



Emblem for Sicherheitsdienst – the SS's internal intelligence service.

Gestapo existed in all occupied countries

The Gestapo torturers terrorised civilian populations throughout Europe. Local officials developed their own methods.

★ The Gestapo was an extended arm of the German Nazi party, governed by the iron fist of Heinrich Himmler. It monitored and fought all those who were thought to pose a threat to the state.

The organisation's 32,000 men worked with terrifying precision and during the war years it developed a number of methods to unravel the enemy's network. "Very simple diet; hard bunk; dark cell; deprivation of sleep; exhaustive drilling; also flogging" was how the official Gestapo directive described the methods used in a secret document dated 12th June, 1942.

In reality, the secret police used a significant number of more brutal methods to extract information from their enemies in Germany and in the occupied territories. Water torture and abuse were used everywhere where the Gestapo operated, but some prosecutors also developed their own techniques.

Norway: deadly bath of iced water.

Gestapo man Richard Bruns forced information from the resistance by laying them in an ice bath until they almost froze to death. Bruns was executed in Oslo in 1947.

Denmark: whipped with wires.

In Copenhagen's Gestapo headquarters, torturer Ib Birkedal bent his suspects over a table and whipped them with wires until they began to talk.

Poland: prisoners beat each other.

The Gestapo ran a large prison in Poland, but did not perform the torture themselves. Instead, non-Jews were forced to abuse their Jewish fellow prisoners as the Gestapo watched.

Belgium: electrodes in open wounds.

Gestapo agent Max Gunter first cut his prisoners. Then he placed electrodes in the open wounds and turned on the power.

Netherlands: torturer

Andries Pieters invented his own methods of torture. He made his opponents talk by tying string tightly around their genitals.



Klaus Barbie always brought his infamous baton.

The Gestapo executed over 4,000 civilians in Lyon during Barbie's regime. Here a member of the French resistance has been hung from a tree.

**"BARBIE MANAGED TO
PLANT AROUND 20 AGENTS
INTO THE RESISTANCE
MOVEMENT"**

► September 1935. It appears it was here he found his true calling, finding both clarity and clearly defined foes. Over the next few years, Barbie received intense training in policing and in interrogation techniques to break any “enemy of the state”.

FROM 1940 things moved at a furious pace. In April, Barbie was promoted to SS-Untersturmführer. Five days later he married, and then in May he was posted to occupied Amsterdam. He threw himself into his work with great energy, constantly gathering intelligence. He confined arrested Jews in a newly created ghetto and sent thousands of people by train to the concentration camps in Buchenwald and Mauthausen.

Gestapo high command took notice. Barbie was promoted to captain and in November 1942 he was sent to Lyon in France as chief of the local Gestapo.

For the Nazis, Lyon was a ticking time bomb. Jews, communists and opponents had built widespread networks throughout the city from the beginning of the war. When Barbie spoke to his subordinates for the first time at the Gestapo’s headquarters on the third floor of Hotel Terminus, the message was

quite clear: “*Ich bin gekommen om zu töten*” – I came to kill.

Barbie took advantage of his experiences in Amsterdam, and soon filled Montluc prison with Jews. But the resistance movement led by Jean Moulin proved harder to break. Those involved were fearless and so good at melting into the local population that La Concorde café was a meeting place for both the Gestapo and the resistance movement. Often the enemies sat just a few metres apart drinking espresso.

Barbie managed to plant around 20 agents into the resistance movement, and eventually information began to filter back to Gestapo headquarters. A notice board in the basement of Hotel Terminus was filled with pictures and information that revealed the links between the suspects.

THE BIG BREAKTHROUGH came in 1943. A well-placed French traitor tipped Barbie about a secret meeting that would take place in a villa in Lyon. All the resistance movement leaders were there. That same evening, Moulin was barely able to start the meeting before the door was kicked ►



RUE DES ARCHIVES/AGF/BL

A traitor revealed resistance fighter Jean Moulin in 1943. Despite sadistic torture, the Frenchman did not say a single word.

Torture would make the prisoner talk

Red-hot needles, handcuffs with spikes, and oxygen. Klaus Barbie was prepared to use all possible methods to force prisoners to talk.

- ★ **Handcuff with spikes:** the prisoner was handcuffed. When they were raised to the roof by chains, spikes on the inside drilled their flesh.
- ★ **Just fists:** Barbie used to abuse his prisoners himself. A witness has told that he hit directly into open wounds and fractures.
- ★ **Baton:** Barbie always had a small black baton padded with lead with him when he interrogated a prisoner.
- ★ **Bottle:** beer bottles were pushed deep into the prisoner’s mouth until their lips split.
- ★ **Morning star:** prisoners were ordered to lie on their stomach. Then Barbie struck them with a spiked ball. A female victim lost the ability to walk after the torture.
- ★ **Cannula:** one prisoner had oxygen injected into their bladder.

- ★ **Red-hot needles:** Jean Moulin, the French resistance fighter, had red-hot needles pushed under his nails.
- ★ **Electrodes:** captives were given electric shocks of varying intensity and duration.
- ★ **Tooth pliers:** if the prisoner denied the charge or refused to answer, Barbie often responded by pulling out one of the victim’s teeth.
- ★ **Tendon removal:** a prisoner told of how Barbie drilled a hole in his hand, jabbed a finger into the wound and pulled out the tendons.
- ★ **Skin flaying:** a prisoner

testified to this medieval torture method. Skin was torn off in long strips and then the prisoner was lowered into a chemical cocktail.

- ★ **Bathtub with boiling water:** quick dips in the water gave prisoners second-degree burns.
- ★ **Bath with ice water:** used to wake up unconscious prisoners so that their torture could continue.



SHUTTERSTOCK

Executioner thrived in Lyon

The Gestapo established its headquarters in a hotel. While the policemen drank at the bar, the prisoners were waiting in the torture cellar.

Gestapo prison:

Lyon's largest prison, where thousands of Jews and resistance members were imprisoned and interrogated before being deported to concentration camps.



HEMIS/ALAMY/IBL

87 km from Lyon

Children's hideaway:

the Jewish orphanage in Izieu, where Barbie found 44 children who he sent to Auschwitz. All were killed just after their arrival.



Gestapo Headquarters Hotel Terminus:

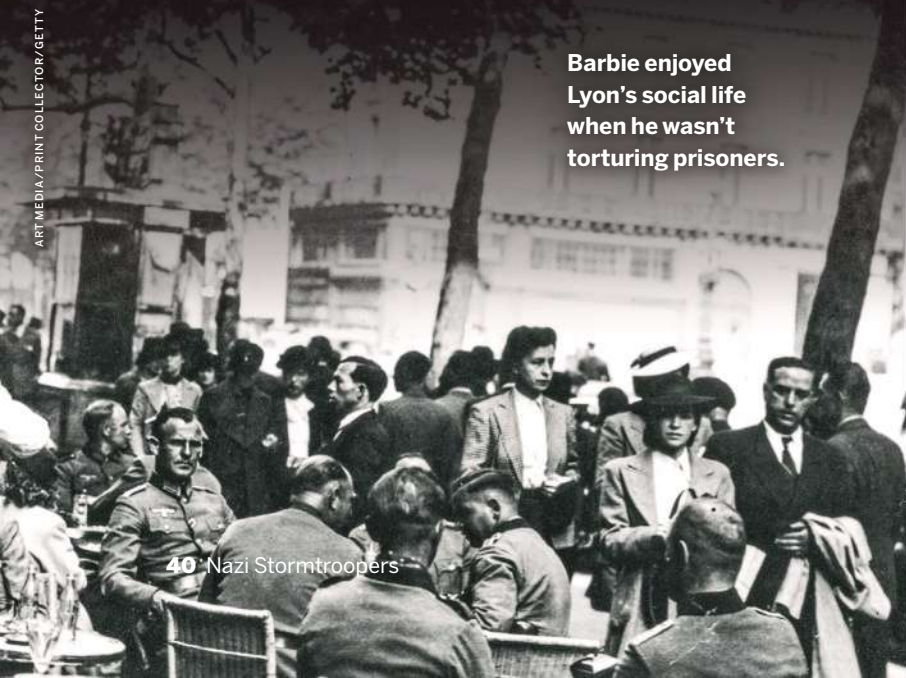
the pleasant hotel near the train station was the Gestapo's headquarters. German officers enjoyed drinks at the bar while the prisoners shouted in vain from the torture chambers.



IBL

Barbie's last stop, the airport in Lyon, where he ordered the assassination of the last 109 prisoners before he fled to Germany.

Barbie enjoyed Lyon's social life when he wasn't torturing prisoners.



40 Nazi Stormtroopers

in and the room was filled with manic German commandos as brawls broke out.

Barbie had caught the French in their own backyard. In a matter of minutes, all were handcuffed and removed. When the Gestapo's black cars drove in through the gate at Montluc prison, everyone knew what would happen: all the French had heard rumours about the torture.

Barbie started by attempting to charm his prisoners into talking. He offered Moulin a drink and a cigar in the elegant bar at Hotel Terminus. A pianist played Chopin, and portraits of Hitler, Göring and Goebbels stared down from the walls. But Moulin refused to talk. He stared down at the table and did not say a single word.

Barbie became furious at this slight and he took the Frenchman into suite 68. His assistant Dr Bartelmus had prepared the tools for Barbie's torture: knuckledusters, whips, handcuffs with pins, needles, a lit candle and Barbie's black baton.

Dr Bartelmus held Moulin's hand between the door and the door frame while Barbie repeatedly hit the door. The Frenchman's fingers were broken one by one. The screams could not be heard from the soundproofed room. Needles were warmed up to glowing before being pushed under Moulin's nails. He was assaulted with knuckledusters and clubs as blood spewed from a number of wounds.

"I want names!" Barbie asked time after time, but Moulin remained silent.

WHEN THE FRENCHMAN passed out from pain, Barbie pushed his head into a bath of icy water so Moulin almost drowned. Roughly he was pulled up from the water, and Barbie repeated his questions. Then Moulin was pressed under the water again.

Moulin was cuffed with screw-levered handcuffs around his wrists. The cuffs were tightened so spikes on the inside broke through to the bone and blood flowed. His legs were also crushed.

The torture lasted for several days. Moulin's nails were pulled out, needles were stabbed into his body, he was branded and beaten again and again. Every evening he was driven back to Montluc prison where the prisoners tried to fix his injuries. One of the prisoners, Christian Pineau, remembers the long night of horror:

"He had lost consciousness, his eyes were hollowed as if they were buried in his head. He had an ugly bluish wound on his temple. A low moan escaped from his swollen lips". At the same time, Barbie threw himself into Lyon's nightlife, where liquor flowed freely and scantily clad women crowded around the powerful officers. Several of them – including Barbie – were treated for sexually transmitted diseases. Barbie loved playing the piano and singing old German songs during these wild



Personal effects and pictures that belonged to executed civilians in a German extermination camp.

parties, and his fingers danced elegantly over the keys. Obviously, the audience had no idea that a few hours earlier the same fingers had been smeared in blood from their countrymen.

AT THE BEGINNING OF JULY, Moulin was taken to Hotel Terminus for the last time. Barbie asked the same questions again – but Moulin neither could nor would say a single word.

Barbie lost his patience. In pure frustration he struck and kicked the Frenchman with renewed strength until Moulin fainted and fell into a deep coma. The Frenchman's arms, legs and several ribs were broken. Barbie realised that he had lost the battle of wits against Moulin. He dragged the lifeless body into an adjoining room and gathered the other resistance members. The sight of his body would make them talk. They saw Moulin lying lifeless on a sofa. His skin was almost yellow, his breath was heavy and his head wrapped in bandages.

Soon afterwards, Moulin was sent by military train to Frankfurt in Germany, where interrogations would continue. But the train had travelled no

“WE WERE OVERWHELMED BY THE UNMISTAKABLE ODOUR OF WARM BLOOD”

further than Metz before the resistance leader Jean Moulin died following an 18-day-long martyrdom.

BARBIE HAD NOT managed to get Moulin to say anything useful, but Hitler was still impressed.

Barbie was awarded Iron Cross 1st Class. The leader of the Free French Forces, General Charles de Gaulle responded from his exile in London by awarding Moulin a posthumous Order of Liberation.

Barbie's focus gradually shifted from ordinary interrogations to sadistic torture sessions and outright mass murder of prisoners.

When Adrien Richard, deputy police chief of Lyon, visited Gestapo headquarters, he barely believed his own eyes.

“We went down into the cellar,” he recounted later. “When we got to the corridor, we were ►



Incarcerated children behind the barbed wire fence in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945.

Nazis killed 1.5 million children

Klaus Barbie was not the only one who murdered children during World War II.

★ Barbie was by no means the only one who directed his hatred towards children – and his deportation of Jewish children from Izieu's orphanage was not unique in occupied territories. The Nazis regarded Jewish children as "unproductive" and as representatives of the future of Judaism – a new generation that could avenge the murdered. Therefore, thousands of Jewish children were sent by train to concentration camps, where most were killed in the gas chambers after they arrived.

Many newborns were thrown directly into the crematorium ovens, and several thousand children died because they were exposed to the bestial medical experiments of, among others, ruthless concentration camp doctor Josef Mengele.

After the war, Mengele fled to South America, and he was never held accountable for his war crimes.



The youngest child was four years old, the oldest 17 when Klaus Barbie sent the 44 children from Izieu to their death.

The victims from the orphanage



• Sami Adelsheimer, 5 years	• My Halaunbrenner, age unknown
• Hans Ament, 10 years	• Claudine Halaunbrenner 5 years
• Nina Aronowicz, 12 years	• Georges Halpern, 8 years
• Max- Marcel Balsam, 12 years	• Arnold Hirsch, 17 years
• Jean-Paul Balsam, 10 years	• Isidore Kargeman, 10 years
• Esther Benassayag, 12 years	• Renate Krochmal, 8 years
• Elie Benassayag, 10 years	• Liane Krochmal, 6 years
• Jacob Benassayag, 8 years	• Max Leiner, 8 years
• Jacques Benguigui, 12 years	• Claude Levan-Reifman, 10 years
• Richard Benguigui, 7 years	• Fritz Loebmann, 15 years
• Jean-Claude Benguigui, 5 years	• Alice-Jacqueline Luzgart, 10 years
• Barouk-Raoul Bentitou, 12 year	• Paula Mermelstein, 10 years
• Majer Bulka, age unknown	• Marcel Merm elstein, 7 years
• Albert Bulka, 4 years	• Theodor Reis, 16 years
• Lucienne Friedler, 5 years	• Gilles Sadowski, 8 years
• Egon Gamiel, 9 years	• Martha Spiegel, 10 years
• Maurice Gerenstein, 13 years	• Senta Spiegel, 9 years
• Liliane Gerenstein, 11 years	• Sigmund Springer, 8 years
• Henri-Chaïm Goldberg, 13 years	• Sarah Szulklaper, age unknown
• Joseph Goldberg, 12 years	• Max Tetelbaum, 12 years
	• Herman Tetelbaum, 10 years
	• Charles Weltner, 9 years
	• Otto Wertheimer, age unknown
	• Emile Zuckerberg, 5 years

► overwhelmed by the unmistakable odour of warm blood. We went further and came to a puddle of congealed blood in front of a cell door. After the door was opened we witnessed an appalling scene: corpses were piled up in a corner of the cell and literally swimming in a sea of blood. They were all young men who had been killed by machine guns as they faced the door. Some were bound together, and I remember that the postman, still in his uniform, had pulled himself up on a chair before being killed.”

IN MARCH 1944, 43-year-old Lise Lesevre was arrested by the Gestapo. She was an important courier for the resistance movement and brought a letter for a key resistance member “Didier”.

In the basement of Montluc prison she was hung up naked by the screw-levered handcuffs. Then an unbearable ritual of torture and assault began: interrogation, rape, maltreatment, multiple interrogation then another rape, abuse, the same interrogation over and over again.

“Who is Didier? Where is Didier” Barbie would ask constantly, staring icily at Lesevre.

“He was terrifying to see, because he had small eyes, like marbles, that moved constantly,” she recalled. Many years later she added: “You had a feeling that a ferocious beast was coming into the cell. It was absolute terror.”

Even when Barbie wasn’t in her cell, he plagued his prisoners by slapping a rider’s crop against his boots as he prowled the basement. In one session, Barbie ordered an assistant to beat Lesevre with a spiked ball hung from a cosh. A vertebra was broken and when she fainted, Barbie called a doctor to revive her. As she awoke, he stood over her with piano music playing in the background. Barbie stroked her hands:

“What you’ve done is magnificent, my dear,” he said. “Nobody has held out as long as you. It’s nearly over. I’m very upset, but let’s finish... Who is ‘Didier’?” Silence.

Barbie played his trump card and brought Lesevre’s husband and 15-year-old son in the cell. They were tortured in front of her eyes, but she still said nothing. Thus, Barbie’s sadistic toolbox was empty. He hit his prisoner in the face with his fist and shouted in frustration: “I don’t want to see this stupid woman anymore! Get rid of her!”

But Barbie’s assistants did not kill Lesevre. A German soldier brought coffee to her at night and talked to her reassuringly. The following day she was sent by train to the concentration camp in Ravensbrück. After meeting with Barbie, it almost felt like being released.

Between torture sessions with Lesevre, Barbie was busy searching for the last Jews

hiding in Lyon, and on 6th April, 1944, he was ready for his most cynical atrocity of the war.

It was a warm morning at the orphanage on the hills outside Izieu. The children had been sent there by their parents so that they were safe from the Gestapo and concentration camps. Most of the children were Jewish, something ►

Klaus Barbie joined the Nazi party at 22 years old in 1935 and was recruited to the security service. In 1942 he became the Gestapo chief in Lyon.

WEINSTEIN/EVERETT/BL



► that the orphanage had tried to hide from the German occupying forces. This morning everyone sat in the dining room and drank hot chocolate when two trucks and a passenger car suddenly thundered into the courtyard and came to a sudden stop.

A FEMALE EMPLOYEE realised what was going on and screamed for everyone to run. A group of SS soldiers stormed into the house, tore the screaming children from the arms of the staff and threw them into the truck. The few who managed to get away were quickly brought back crying and carried to the courtyard.

27-year-old Lea Feldblum, managed to flee and hide in the woods. From there she saw everything that happened. In the confusion, a non-Jewish child was also thrown up on the lorry, but he was returned when his identity could be proved using the orphanage's register.

At the same time, Barbie and his assistant Dr Bartelmus stood a stone's throw away and looked on. When the trucks arrived in Lyon, Barbie wrote a short report to the German High Command:

"This morning an end was brought to the activities of the Jewish children's home at Izieu. A total of 41 children aged 3 to 13 were arrested. In addition, the whole of the Jewish population, ten persons including five women, were arrested. No money or other values were found. Transport to Drancy will take place on 7th April 1944." The short note was signed "Barbie".

Drancy was a collection point for arrested French Jews. Children and orphanage staff were forced into dirty cattle wagons at the train station, and then they were driven off to Auschwitz. Shortly after arrival they were murdered in the gas chambers.

On 6th June, 1944, the Allies initiated their invasion of France – D-Day – and while the blood flowed on the Normandy beaches, Klaus Barbie

"EVERY DAY HE CAME SMILING INTO THE CELL AND KICKED HER OPEN WOUNDS"

hurried to seize the few remaining Jewish families still in Lyon. Married couple Lagrange and their 13-year-old daughter Simone thought liberation was close at hand when they heard news of the Allies' invasion on the radio in the morning. But shortly after, SS soldiers knocked on the door.

As the small family was being taken away, neighbours closed their windows and ignored their cries for help. It became "a day that started with joy and ended in sadness for us", lamented Simone Lagrange later. The family was accommodated in one of the suites in the hotel. Suddenly Barbie came in, dressed in a stylish grey suit and with a cat in his arms. He smiled at Simone, stroked her cheek and said she was pretty. "He cannot be evil since he loves animals", she thought.

BARBIE WANTED TO KNOW where the family's other two children were. He went straight up to 13-year-old Simone and slapped her. He tugged her hair and boxed her ears. Her parents cried and asked for mercy, but Barbie was ice cold. He placed Simone in isolation at Montluc prison, and during the week that followed, he tortured the little girl as if she were a hardened resistance fighter.

Every day he came smiling into the cell and kicked her open wounds. In the end, Barbie took Simone into her parents' cell and held her swollen bloody face up in front of her mother.

"See, now, what you've done to your daughter", hissed the Gestapo boss menacingly.



Che Guevara.

Butcher of Lyon got new job in US

★ After the war, the US employed Klaus Barbie to hunt communists in Germany. In spite of French pressure to have him extradited, the Americans denied any knowledge of the Nazi.

To hide any embarrassing exposé, they helped Barbie escape to Bolivia. The Nazi helped the CIA and Bolivia's army to murder the guerrilla fighter Che Guevara in 1965.



FRANCIS APRESTEQU/GETTY

But once more Barbie turned out to be an ineffective intelligence officer: the Lagrange family did not give him any information he could use. Soon the whole family was deported to Auschwitz, where they were separated. The mother was gassed to death immediately, while Simone and her father were put to work.

A year later, when the camp was evacuated during the last chaotic days of the war, father and daughter got a glimpse of each other. They almost managed to embrace, but then the father was suddenly ordered to his knees and murdered with a single shot. Against all odds, Simone Lagrange survived to tell her story.

IN MID-AUGUST, as Allied forces approached Lyon, Barbie sent as many prisoners as he could by train eastwards. But he retained 109 Jews and resistance members to use as a human shield when he fled to the airport in Bron on 23rd August.

When the Germans arrived at the plane, Barbie gave the ice-cold order that all hostages be shot and dumped in mass graves. Then he boarded a Luftwaffe plane and left France. The following day, the Allies rolled into Lyon and freed 950 despairing prisoners from

Montluc prison. The Gestapo's reign of terror was finally over.

Klaus Barbie deserted after a few months on the Western Front. Then he remained hidden for 38 years – first in Germany and later in South America – with the help of the CIA.

IT WAS NOT UNTIL 1983 that his bloody past finally caught up with him. The former Gestapo executioner was traced by Nazi hunters Serge and Beate Klarsfeld to Bolivia. Then he was extradited to France, where he was convicted of crimes against humanity after a lengthy trial.

During the trial, the extent of Klaus Barbie's crimes came to light. The German murdered or ordered the killings of 4,342 people in the French resistance movement, and he deported 7,591 Jews – men, women and children – to German concentration camps, where most of them died. ★

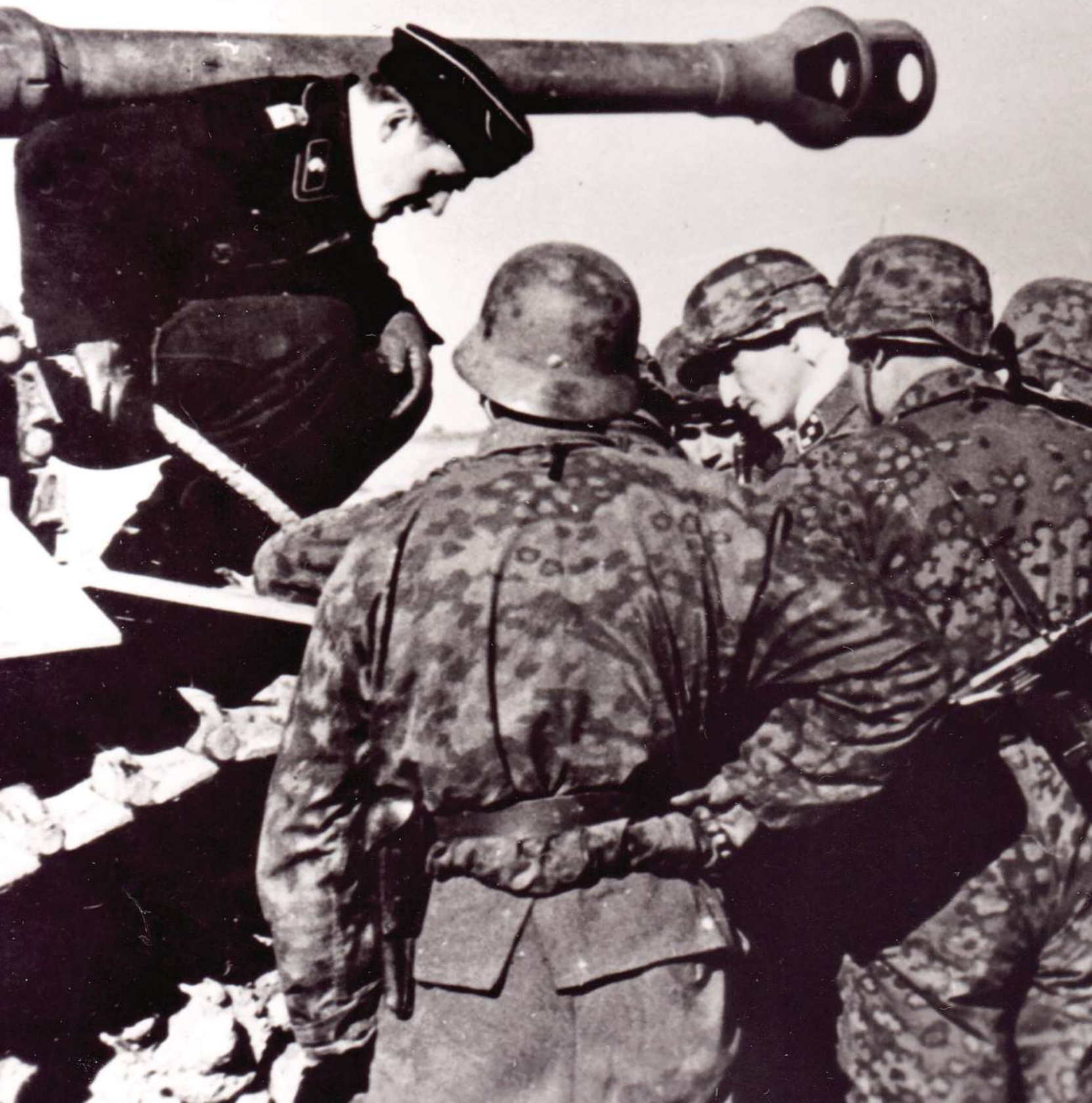
Kasper Schlie is a military historian.

Further reading: *The Devil's Agent* (2013) by Peter McFarren and Fadrique Iglesias ★ *Klaus Barbie: The Butcher of Lyons* (1984) by Tom Bower

On 4th July, 1987 Klaus Barbie was sentenced to life imprisonment. French police led him out of the courtroom in Lyon. Barbie spent four years in jail before he died of leukaemia.

Totenkopf Division

KZ GUARDS



AT THE FRONT

The armoured Totenkopf Division was infamous throughout France, Poland and the Soviet Union due to its brutal methods and ultra-aggressive tactics. Part of the Waffen-SS, the division recruited soldiers and officers from Nazi concentration camps.

Text: **LENNART WESTBERG**

Panzer grenadier troops from the SS's Totenkopf Division check their orders during the Battle of Kursk on the Eastern Front in 1943. A Tiger I heavy tank can be seen in the background.

LENNART WESTBERG

“[TOTENKOPF] EARNED A SOLID REPUTATION AS ONE OF THE MOST RELIABLE AND POWERFUL ARMoured DIVISIONS”

TOTENKOPF DIVISION

All the major totalitarian systems of the 20th century – fascism, communism and Nazism – have created pseudo-elite, paramilitary bodies that operate outside ordinary military and police controls. Examples include Mussolini's Black Shirts (*Milizia Volontaria*), Franco's *Falange Española*, the Soviet's NKVD elite divisions and Himmler's Waffen-SS. In addition to other duties, these special formations also provided an exclusive bodyguard for the respective country's state and party leaders.

The ideological and organisational model adopted by Totenkopf – the feared Waffen-SS division that fought on the Eastern Front from 1941 to 1945 – was based on revolutionary, paramilitary thinking.

THE WAFEN-SS WAS originally created as an armed branch of the Nazi's political militia, the SS. The term Waffen-SS described an umbrella organisation for a confusing conglomerate of armed, police-like, SS forces. Although some of these forces had been around earlier, many established themselves in the aftermath of the Nazi party's power grab in January 1933.

Under the dynamic leadership of Field Marshal Heinrich Luitpold Himmler, the German SS armed forces of the pre-war years grew into the multinational Waffen-SS of World War II, which, at its height, numbered more than one million soldiers. The organisation as a whole also became an effective



The main entrance to the Dachau concentration camp. Theodor Eicke was the camp's second commander. Picture from 1934.

instrument for state-sponsored surveillance, terror and murder both at home and in occupied territories.

THE NOTORIOUS REICHSTAG Fire arson attack that took place in Berlin in 1933 had already given Hitler's party a pretext to push through a decree undermining the freedom and rights of German citizens. Once the decree was in place, the Nazis quickly began to pursue other goals: the arrest of all political opponents and the systemic discrimination against German Jews.

An auxiliary and reserve police force was established to help achieve these goals. It was made up of personnel from the SA (the Sturmabteilung, the Nazi party's original brown-shirted paramilitary) and the SS. In parallel, 1933 also saw the SS recruiting

Symbol stood for loyalty until death

★ The Totenkopf skull symbol was first associated with war in 1632 when Swedish general Åke Totts adopted it as a symbol for his cavalry regiment during the Thirty Years War. As a German military symbol, the death head emblem first appeared in the mid-16th century when Fredrick the Great's household guards began wearing a silver-coloured Totenkopf on their helmets. The use of the death head as a symbol of loyalty to the death continued throughout the 19th century in several Prussian forces. For example, during

WWI, the Totenkopf was used by special German units such as the tank regiments and was adopted by the nation's Stormtroopers in 1918, as well as by the Free Corps paramilitary factions in 1919.

The death head emblem was introduced as a symbol for the SS in 1923 by Julius Schreck, the first leader of Hitler's bodyguard. The organisation initially used the Prussian death head until 1934 when a stylised variant was added to the band of the SS uniform's caps. Guards in the concentration



The death head emblem could be found on the caps of SS uniforms.

camps had brown uniforms with two death heads on the collar until they were phased out in 1940-41 in favour of the Waffen-SS's grey-green uniform with the double-line SS emblem (*Siegrunen*).

The soldiers in Totenkopf Division kept the insignia of a skull on their right-hand collar until the end of the war. It's worth noting that the symbol's use went beyond the SS: several Wehrmacht forces also used the Totenkopf emblem, first and foremost the army's panzer divisions.



CHARLES TRANG

Forced labour at Dachau concentration camp in 1934. In the middle, dressed in a brown SS uniform, is a camp guard from Oberbayern regiment.

and training armed guards for the newly established concentration camps. Camp wardens wore brown uniforms with a death's head symbol (the *totenkopf*) on the collar of the uniform jacket. Initially called *SS-Wachverbände*, they were later renamed *SS-Totenkopfverbände*, or the Death Head unit.

AS HISTORY SO often teaches us, revolution devours its own children. During the Night of the Long Knives on 30th June, 1934, Hitler gave orders for the SS to assassinate all leading members of the SA, the paramilitary organisation that had helped him in his rise to power. The SA leadership had made the fatal mistake of insisting that the *Wehrmacht* (the regular German armed forces) should be merged with the SA to form a revolutionary, politicised army under its control. Hitler disagreed.

The leader of the SA, Ernst Julius Günther Röhm, was shot in his cell at Stadelheim Prison by Major General Theodor Eicke, commander of the Dachau concentration camp after Eicke supposedly created a list of “undesirable persons” the month before.

Many more SA leaders (and an array of other inconvenient political opponents) were also shot at the same prison by police officers and staff from Dachau, or taken to the barracks of Hitler's

“WAFFEN-SS WAS... CREATED AS AN ARMED BRANCH OF THE NAZIS' POLITICAL MILITIA”

personal bodyguard (*Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*) at Lichtenfelde where they were given one-minute trials then shot by firing squad.

The three-day killing spree proved that *Totenkopf* and the other armed SS units were loyal to Hitler alone. Their reward came on 20th July, 1934 when the soon-to-be-Führer made the SS an independent organisation and granted Himmler permission to form an armed division to serve alongside the *Wehrmacht*. But while senior *Wehrmacht* officers may have been glad to be rid of their upstart rivals in the SA, in reality they gained an even more dangerous opponent in the SS, which soon began an ambitious process of expansion that continued until 1945.

RÖHM'S NOTION OF a revolutionary, politicised army was by no means alien to Hitler and Himmler. ►

TOTENKOPF DIVISION



CHARLES TRANG

This photo shows Totenkopf soldiers being prepared for field action in 1939, including receiving instruction on how to use the MP 38 machine gun, the forerunner of the MP 40.



LENNART WESTBERG

France, 1940. A soldier from the Totenkopf division takes a break from the fighting on a disabled French Somua S35 tank.

- The loss of imperial territories, the ruinous economic consequences of reparations and the dramatic reduction of military hardware and personnel at the end of World War I was a lasting trauma for the German people. To avoid such collapses in the future and to strengthen the Nazi party in the present, Himmler planned to create a politically reliable, elite management framework (*Staatsschutzkorps*) from all branches of the SS (including the 'Germanic' volunteers of the Waffen-SS). It was partly to administer the new "Greater German Reich", and partly for governing the Lebensraum project of ethnic cleansing and colonisation in the East.

UNTIL 1939, THE camp forces extended to four SS regiments, with a total of 6,500 men. At this time, there were six permanent concentration camps: Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Flossenbürg and Ravensbrück with 21,400 prisoners. These camps were subject to the Concentration Camps Inspectorate and Eicke, by now promoted to lieutenant general, was the boss. His personality greatly influenced the training and ideology of the Death Head guards at the concentration camps and

later, the soldiers recruited into the Death Head Totenkopf division of the Waffen-SS.

Eicke has often been overlooked by students of history, despite being one of the Reich's most influential SS leaders. As a new commander in Dachau in 1933, Eicke introduced a system of inhumane punishments that would be meted out to camp prisoners for the most minor infractions. Known as the Dachau System, the brutal regime became the model for all concentration camps as well as the SS extermination camps that developed in Poland later in the war. Eicke recruited and educated the camps' officers and guards to be masters of life and death.

DURING HITLER'S INVASION of Poland in the autumn of 1939, three Death Head regiments were placed under the command of Eicke: Brandenburg, Oberbayern and Thuringia. Drawing many of their recruits from the concentration camps, their objective was to follow the army and "pacify" occupied Polish territories. In reality, this meant killing members of the Polish leadership and clergy as well as teachers and other intelligentsia. They also murdered Polish Jews, disabled people and anyone deemed to be a rebel. The indiscriminate killings prompted Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz, a Wehrmacht district chief in occupied Poland, to pen a letter of protest. He sent it directly to Hitler's headquarters. It was ignored.

In October 1939, Hitler decided to form three new SS field divisions: SS Totenkopf, SS Verfügungsddivision (later renamed Das Reich) and SS Polizei Division (which was drawn from ►

"THE NEW, RADICALISED OFFICERS WOULD BLINDLY FOLLOW ALL ORDERS"

Dachau's chief led Totenkopf division

★ Theodor Eicke was born in 1892 in Alsace, then a German territory. He was the son of a railway station master. During World War I he served both as an administrator and on the front line. When the war ended, like millions of other German soldiers, he ended up unemployed, impoverished and politically disillusioned.

In order to support his wife and children, Eicke attempted to pursue a career in the police, but was dismissed due to his repeated involvement in actions and demonstrations against the democratic government in Berlin. In 1930, Eicke joined the SS, then still a tiny force of 2,921 men. Chief of the SS Heinrich Himmler soon recognised Eicke as an unusually good organiser and, after just 15 months of service, he was promoted to the rank of colonel.

DESPITE CLASHING politically with Gauleiter Joseph Bürckel, who had him arrested and held in a mental asylum, Eicke was soon given a clean bill of health and further promoted by Himmler who tasked him with overseeing all concentration camp systems and personnel. The prickly but calculating Eicke even fought off the almighty Reinhard Heydrich when he

tried bringing the camps into his sphere of influence. Eicke was popular with camp personnel because of his simple, direct approach and the way he referred to his Death Head troops as a specially selected elite.

In the field, the Red Army discovered that Eicke, as chief of the Totenkopf Panzer Division, was a careful but hard opponent. His front-line troops shared the same merciless culture of callous superiority that Eicke encouraged in his camp guards. Whether under attack from Soviet T-34 tanks, Katyusha rocket launchers or infantry offensives, the Death Head Division proved itself a reliable member of the Nazis' Eastern Front mobile reserve, acting as "fire fighters" in crisis situations.

Eicke was decorated in 1942 with the Iron Cross for his actions at Demyansk.

ACCORDING TO Charles W Sydnor, "to his men Eicke was a soldier's general. Habitually near or in the thick of [the] fighting." He was probably the reason for the more relaxed atmosphere between the SS's officers and men compared to the strained relations between the Wehrmacht's ranks. In a letter penned in 1981, Joachim Ruoff, the commander of SS-Führungshauptamt, referred to Eicke

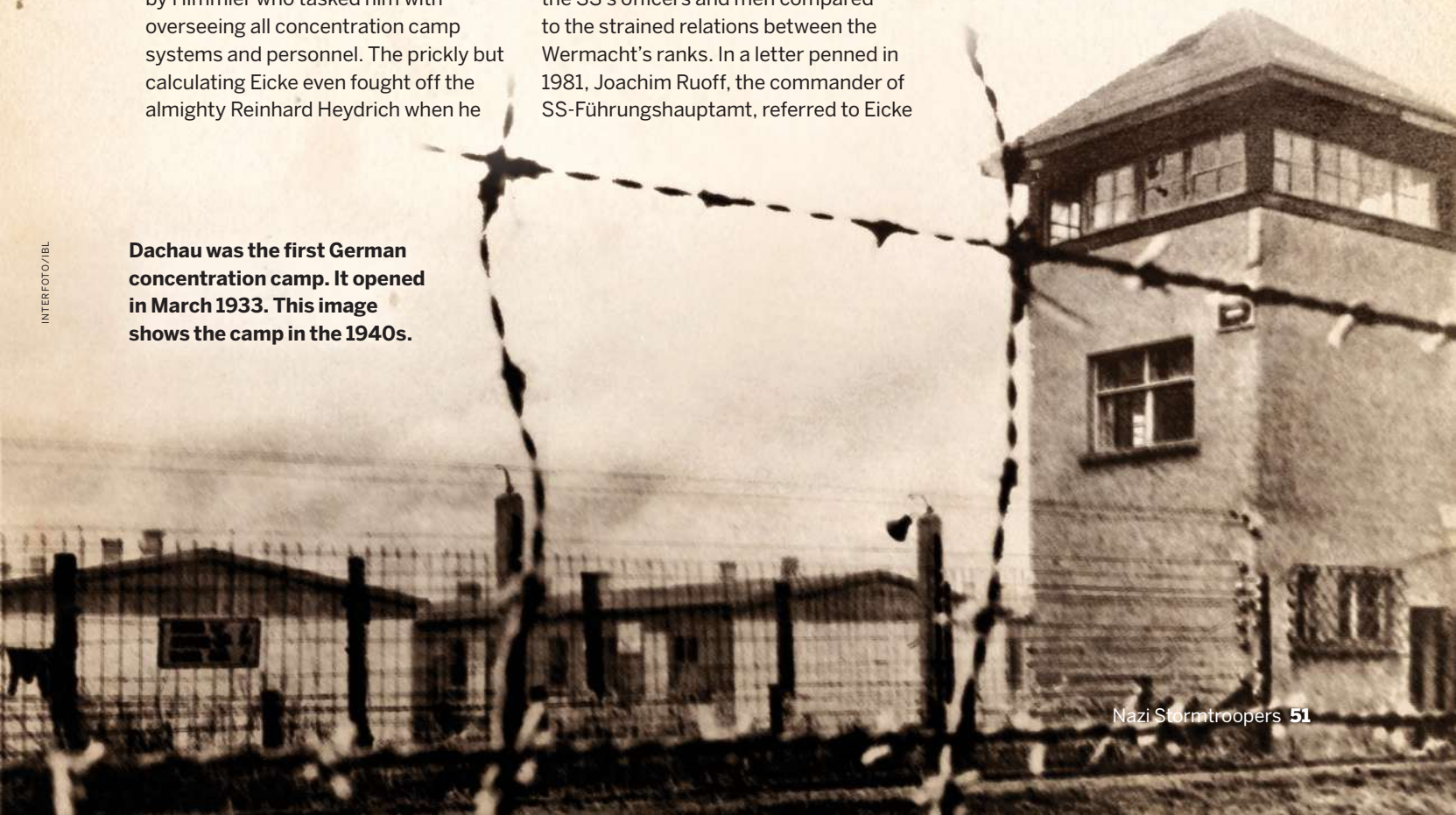


BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 146-1974-160-13A / CC-BY-SA 3.0

as "a national socialist who belonged to the left wing. I would even dare call him a social revolutionary."

On 26th February, 1943, during the German counter-offensive at Kharkov, Eicke's reconnaissance plane was shot down near the town of Artelnoye, killing the lieutenant general, pilot and an ordinance officer. If Eicke had survived the war, he would undoubtedly have been tried as a war criminal, primarily for his role as commander of the Concentration Camp Inspectorate. ★

Dachau was the first German concentration camp. It opened in March 1933. This image shows the camp in the 1940s.



TOTENKOPF DIVISION



ULSTEIN/GETTY

Totenkopf soldiers carrying Kar98k bolt action rifles camouflaged themselves with reeds to avoid the enemy.



CHARLES TRANG

The Sd Kfz 251, a German half-track AV unit fitted with a Soviet DShK heavy machine gun. Image from 1943.



CHARLES TRANG

A VW Schwimmwagen, an amphibious, four-wheel drive off-roader, crosses a river in France. Photo taken 1942 or 1943.

► the police). The problem, however, was to find personnel for the new divisions. The Wehrmacht was responsible for the deployment of new recruits and it ensured that the best men went to its units.

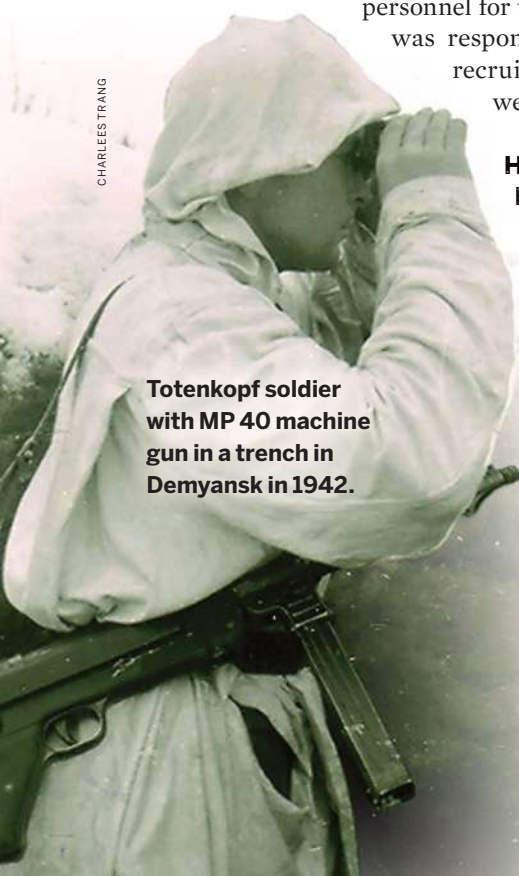
HIMMLER'S INNOVATIVE RECRUITMENT

manager, Colonel Gottlob Berger, cut through this Gordian knot by transferring various headquarters and reserve police forces as well as trained personnel from Allgemeine SS to the new field divisions. Adding personnel from the Junker schools (where SS officers were trained) and various administrative units, he created a new combined force: the Waffen-SS. Himmler, it seems, was already gathering together the armed SS and police forces with the idea of turning them into a coherent SS Army Corps,

just as Röhm had wanted to do with the SA before the Night of the Long Knives.

While Berger busied himself finding new personnel, Himmler tasked Eicke with establishing the motorised infantry division Totenkopf. With his usual fervour, Eicke built it around his model concentration camp at Dachau. The three Death Head regiments that had been used in the "pacification" of Poland – Brandenburg, Oberbayern and Thuringia – formed the backbone of the infantry, while the local defence force SS Heimwehr Danzig provided the division's artillery. As a result, almost half of the division's 15,000 troops were drawn from concentration camp personnel with the remaining 8,000 men – who made up the communication, reconnaissance, engineering and artillery battalions – taken from the Allgemeine SS, the police or elsewhere in the Waffen-SS.

Eicke viewed the addition of non-camp personnel as a threat to the division's esprit de corps – in other words, the blind obedience he had come to expect from the guards in the concentration camps – but the lieutenant general's uncompromising personality



CHARLES TRANG

Totenkopf soldier with MP 40 machine gun in a trench in Demyansk in 1942.



Totenkopf Division and its commander Lieutenant General Theodor Eicke successfully defended the so-called Demyansk Pocket south of Leningrad in the winter and spring of 1941-42.

soon permeated the whole of the new division, which became known for both its strength and brutality.

Most of Totenkopf's senior command had military experience from World War I, and almost all had served in the *Freikorps* (Free Corps, a right-wing paramilitary militia organisation) in the two years following Germany's surrender. They had also served with Eicke in pre-war concentration camps and were blindly loyal to the lieutenant general.

In 1972, Berger revealed in a private letter that in the same way as Oberstgruppenführer Josef "Sepp" Dietrich believed he had dominion over Leibstandarte, Eicke perceived Totenkopf Division as his own "private empire" a fact that occasionally caused "a strained relationship with Himmler as the Reichsführer-SS [the SS's field marshal]".

HITLER'S DECISION TO suspend his offensive on the Western Front in the winter of 1939 proved to be a boon for Totenkopf. Eicke and his operations officer, Colonel Cassius Freiherr von Montigny, were given the opportunity to train the infantry and artillery in co-ordinated manoeuvres, to merge

"TOTENKOPF WAS FINALLY PUT INTO BATTLE AGAINST THE BRITISH AND FRENCH"

battalions and send their most promising officer candidates to Junker schools.

In April 1940, Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs, the head of the Wehrmacht, arrived to inspect Eicke's division. The aristocratic army man had never reviewed the troops before, but he had a poor opinion of the SS in general and thought of Totenkopf as a collection of thuggish bullies and street fighters. It was a surprise, therefore, when he discovered that the entire division was motorised and supremely mobile. Then to his further astonishment, Eicke's soldiers demonstrated advanced attack tactics in a minefield using live ammunition. By the time the inspection came to a ►

TOTENKOPF DIVISION

► close, von Weichs was almost lyrical in his praise for the Death Head battalions and even asked Eicke to give his best to Himmler when he saw him again. It's clear that Eicke knew how to deal with his superiors when needed.

THE SS ARMED forces, including Eicke's Death Head troops, merged to form the Waffen-SS in 1940, bringing with them an ideology that was totally at odds with their Prussian military predecessors. The Nazis promoted men without any regard to social background or education, men who had no traditional reference systems and who were fully adapted to the purpose of the regime and its apocalyptic Lebensraum mission in the east. It was hoped that the new, radicalised officers would blindly follow all orders issued by the Führer, while disregarding traditional Christian values and established human rights.

Eicke's tactical prescription consisted of an uncomplicated formula: the division should concentrate all its fire-power on a single section of the enemy line and keep attacking it until the opponent either gave up or was wiped out. This principle, which was specially designed for officers who were poorly schooled in military tactics, guided the division's battle strategy throughout Eicke's period of command.

HITLER'S INVASION OF France and the Benelux countries began on 10th May, 1940. After being held in

reserve, Totenkopf was finally put into battle against the British and French forces that had been cut off and were trapped with their backs to the English Channel. On 19th May, Totenkopflinked with the 7th Army Division under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's command at Cambrai. In the days that followed, Eicke's forces experienced considerable losses during minor clean-up operations, but they were about to experience much worse.

At Arras, two British combat battalions attacked the flank of Rommel's and Eicke's divisions, causing panic in the German ranks. Even Rommel lost his head and reported to his staff that he had been attacked by five British armoured divisions. Despite the fact that the British attack had been badly coordinated with the French forces, the result was still a hard lesson for the Totenkopf Division, which lost more than 100 men, 42 of whom were killed.

The British-French bridgehead at Dunkirk had an outer defence line, cut by watercourses. It was an easy position to defend, something Totenkopf learned to its cost when it tried to cross the La Bassée Canal and the upper course of the River Lys. The British, with their excellent Lee Enfield rifles, had the reputation of being first-rate shooters, and their fusillade was so intense and accurate that many of Eicke's soldiers thought they were being subjected to machine-gun fire.

The heavy infantry losses were a serious blow to the SS soldiers' perilously inflated pride and sense of cultural superiority. In the fighting that followed, Totenkopf and Leibstandarte perpetrated two separate war crimes that forever tarnished the reputation of the newly created Waffen-SS.

During the struggles at Bethune and Le Paradis, the British rearguard, recognising that the fate of the British Expeditionary Force was in their hands, fought a superb defensive action to buy time for the evacuation from Dunkirk. Major Heinz Bertling's Death Head regiment recklessly attempted to storm the well-camouflaged British machine-gun nests and sustained heavy losses as a consequence.

Bertling then lost radio contact causing chaos among the German command staff. An apoplectic Eicke screamed out an unintelligible series of commands and counter-commands further confusing the situation. Matters deteriorated when the capable von Montigny was suddenly invalidated by a haemorrhaging stomach ulcer and Colonel Hans Friedemann Götze, who had been sent to extricate the bungling Bertling, was killed by a British sniper.

MEANWHILE, THE BRAVE British rearguard fought until almost the last man. Defending the small hamlet of Le Paradis on 26th May, The Royal Norfolk Regiment continued its resistance until the men ran out of ammunition and it had shrunk to less than the ►

"THE LOSSES WERE A SERIOUS BLOW TO THE SS SOLDIERS' PERILOUSLY INFLATED PRIDE"



These are the main battles in which Totenkopf participated. The map shows the modern-day national boundaries.

Massacre at Le Paradis

★ On 26th May, 1940 in the small hamlet of Le Paradis a few miles north of Arras, Totenkopf captured the remains of a British battalion: 99 men from The Royal Norfolk Regiment under Major Lisle Ryder together with soldiers from The Royal Scots. The officer in command was First Lieutenant Fritz Knöchlein who ordered the prisoners of war to be disarmed and taken to a nearby farmhouse. Once there, the captives were lined up facing a barn wall and shot with two machine guns that were set up just before the prisoners arrived.

ALTHOUGH KNÖCHLEIN'S men were ordered to kill all survivors with bayonets and rifles, two British soldiers survived the massacre: Albert Pooley and William O'Callaghan. They crawled under the mound of corpses' and hid for three days before they were captured by another German army unit.

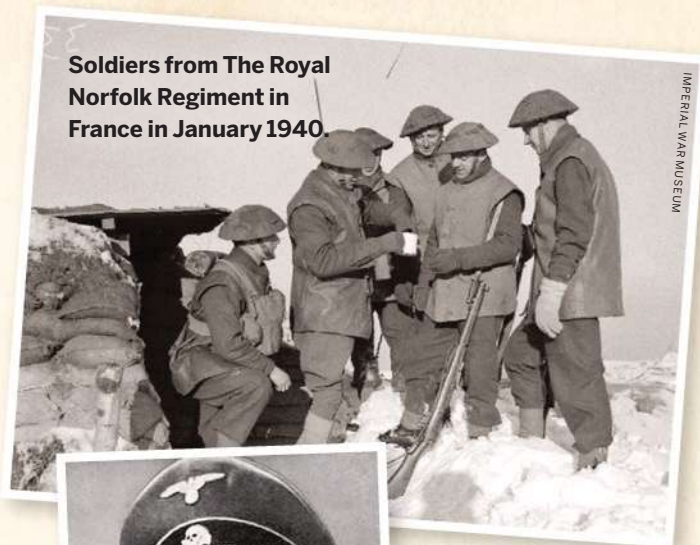
As a war invalid, Pooley was sent home in 1942, but the British authorities refused to believe his story. It wasn't until O'Callaghan, who had been held as a German prisoner of war, came back to Britain in 1945 and confirmed the tale that an official investigation was

launched into the war crimes at Le Paradis.

Information about the massacre spread within Totenkopf Division and reached the ears of Eicke's superior, General Ernst Erich Hoepner. The Wehrmacht man disliked the SS in general and Eicke in particular and initiated an investigation into the events at Le Paradis, hoping to get Eicke dismissed, but the attempt was unsuccessful, probably after Himmler intervened.

KNÖCHLEIN'S CAREER was not hurt by the Le Paradis incident. He advanced to lieutenant general and commanded the panzer grenadier regiment SS-Norway. He was also decorated with the Iron Cross after the Battle of Kurland in 1944. There is a note in Knöchlein's SS staff record made in October 1944 by

Soldiers from The Royal Norfolk Regiment in France in January 1940.



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM



Fritz Knöchlein

Major General Joachim Ziegler that describes Knöchlein as "an extremely ruthless and cold-blooded man who, after a certain length of time, transforms a military force into a machine".

ZIEGLER'S THEN

operating officer, Helmut von Bockelberg, confirmed in 1982 that Ziegler finally managed to dismiss Knöchlein from the Nordland Division at the end of 1944.

On 11th October, 1948 Knöchlein was found guilty of murder by a British military court in Hamburg. He was hanged in Hameln on 21st January, 1949. His 97 victims lie in a mass grave in Le Paradis' war cemetery. ★



A memorial stone over the victims now marks the location of the massacre in Le Paradis.

TOTENKOPF DIVISION

► size of a single company. The 99 survivors, many of whom were injured, finally surrendered to SS forces and were taken captive.

Soon after they were lined up in the courtyard of one of the hamlet's farmhouses and executed by machine gun fire on the orders of Totenkopf company commander Lieutenant Colonel Fritz Knöchlein. Those who survived the hail of bullets were stabbed with bayonets and left to die. Only two soldiers survived the massacre and were able to testify about the event after the war.

The day after, soldiers from Leibstandarte opened fire on 80 Allied prisoners of war, including a large group from The Royal Warwickshire infantry regiment, who had been under guard inside a barn



Collar with the characteristic death head symbol worn by Totenkopf soldiers.

near the French town of Wormhoudt. Both of these massacres were instigated on the initiative of the lower command, and the motives are unclear today. Perhaps it was frustration at the major losses suffered by the SS, simple revenge or something else entirely. The fact that the Death Head Division was established with a hard core of guards taken from the concentration camps would seem to be a contributing factor, though. Such men had become inured to the suffering of others after years spent violently punishing the unfortunate victims of the Nazi regime.

According to Professor Charles W Sydnor, author of *Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945*, Totenkopf Division was also responsible for murdering hundreds of captive French colonial

Totenkopf Panzer III tanks equipped with spaced armour plating roll over the Russian steppes near Oryol during the Battle of Kursk in July 1943.

ULLSTEIN/GETTY



troops from Morocco and Senegal. According to the division's own war diary, one day's fighting resulted in "25 French prisoners and 44 dead Negroes". Sadly, there were many more entries of a similar nature.

DURING THE BATTLE of France, The Death Head Division spent 18 days in combat and lost 1,152 men: ten percent of its total force. In the Wehrmacht's report of the campaign, the Waffen-SS force received no particular praise. Indeed, it was barely mentioned.

However, despite some dubious actions, Himmler's field units left France with valuable war experience and an enhanced reputation. Once it was motorised, the Waffen-SS always followed in the wake of the panzer divisions and

usually participated in the fiercest fighting. Its impressive attack record came partly from the SS soldiers' physical endurance and partly from their ideologically conditioned fighting spirit.

Between the campaign in France and Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Totenkopf Division was stationed in southern France. Eicke, who in the autumn of 1940 realised that there would be a campaign in the East, used the time well. He reorganised his motorised regiments into more powerful combat groups (battle groups), each with its own infantry, artillery and anti-aircraft units along with communication and engineering support troops.

The result was greater firepower and increased mobility. He also intensified the political indoctrination ►



**“TOTENKOPF WOULD
MEET ITS MIGHTIEST
FOE: THE RED ARMY”**

TOTENKOPF DIVISION



ULLSTEIN/GETTY

► of his soldiers, fully aware that Operation Barbarossa – the code name for the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union – would be a genocide that would result in the utter destruction of all “inferior races” and a closely related, yet hostile ideology.

The invasion of the East would serve two purposes: first it would be a crusade against “Jewish Bolshevism” and second it would be a colonial war for Lebensraum. It would also be where the Third Reich and Totenkopf would meet their mightiest foe: the Red Army.

ON 3RD JUNE, 1941, 55 trains transported Totenkopf east from Bordeaux to East Prussia. The division now entered Generaloberst Erich Hoepner’s 4th Army Group, which would lead the campaign through the Baltic states and on to Leningrad.

At 03.00 on 22nd June, 1941, the Third Reich invaded the Soviet Union. The army that marched

Totenkopf soldiers are pictured during the Battle of Kursk in July 1943.

east was the greatest concentration of combat forces in history. It was a giant, multinational invasion force. However, after initially appearing to prosper on all fronts, Hitler’s campaign stalled in early 1941 when it reached the outskirts of Leningrad and Moscow.

On 30th June, 1941 the Totenkopf Division crossed the river Dūna (the Daugava in modern-day Latvia) and immediately became embroiled in intense fighting against the Red Army. In December, Eicke reported to Berlin that his losses numbered just under 9,000 men.

A decisive Soviet counter-attack left Totenkopf surrounded from February to April 1942 in the so-called Demyansk Pocket, close to Ilmen Lake in Russia. There, Eicke strengthened the core of a well-organised defence, but the losses were horrendous with 80 percent of the division dead, wounded or missing. Totenkopf’s campaign on the Eastern Front had lasted one year and had almost decimated the entire division. In August 1942, Totenkopf’s deputy commander Lieutenant General Max Simon reported to Himmler that Totenkopf Division was manning four miles of front line, even though they had just 52 officers and 2,685 soldiers at their disposal.

“HITLER WAS IMPRESSED BY THE DEAD HEAD DIVISION’S EFFORTS IN DEMYANSK”

HITLER WAS IMPRESSED by the Death Head Division’s efforts in the Demyansk valley, and summoned Eicke to his headquarters several times

in the summer of 1942. Hitler provided Eicke's new setup with a full tank regiment and, more importantly, a company of the new heavy Tiger tanks. On the personnel front, three quarters of the available positions had to be filled with new recruits. Their training took place in France from November 1942 to January 1943.

During March 1943, under the brilliant leadership of Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, Waffen-SS broke two Soviet armies in a counter-attack at Kharkov, thus stabilising the Eastern Front. Hitler credited Waffen-SS and the SS Panzer regiments, including the refitted Totenkopf Division, for the victories. Eicke wasn't around to hear the plaudits, though. The lieutenant general's reconnaissance plane had been shot down on the Eastern Front on February 26th, 1943 resulting in his death. But while Eicke was gone his Division fought on.

IN THE SUMMER of 1943, the Red Army suffered major losses in terms of men and machines at the hands of Hitler's forces at the pivotal Battle of Kursk. Ultimately, though, the campaign proved a strategic defeat for the Nazis, yet while Totenkopf fielded just a quarter of the number of tanks and infantry facing them, the division refused to cede an inch of ground to the two Soviet corps that opposed it during three days of brutal combat in mid-July, 1943.

In spring 1944, Army Group South was forced to retreat to southern Ukraine due to General Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky and General Fyodor Tolbukhin's advance across the river Dnestr. During three weeks in April, Totenkopf was an effective fighting rearguard for the 8th Army during its retreat to Romania.

DESPITE HEAVY LOSSES, the troop's fighting spirit remained undiminished, no doubt boosted by the arrival of the new Panther tanks in the same month. As April turned to May, Totenkopf linked with the Panzer Grenadier Division Großdeutschland to carry out successful holding actions at Târgu Frumos east of the Carpathian Mountains.

Operation Bagration was the codename for a major Red Army offensive against the central section of the German Eastern Front. The attack took place between 23rd June and 29th August, 1944 and resulted in the Soviets breaking through German lines, overrunning and subsequently breaking the 34 Divisions of General Ernst Bernhard Wilhelm Busch's Army Centre Group. As a result of the centre's collapse, Soviet forces were able to advance deep into enemy territory. Within four weeks they had liberated Belarus, occupied a large part of Lithuania and entered Poland. They reached Warsaw a short time after, but only having lost 700,000 men, twice the ►

The British Totenkopf traitor

★ Born in Chiswick in August 1919, Thomas Cooper had a British father and a German mother. He blamed his heritage for his lack of success in job applications to the British services and in 1938 joined the British Union of Fascists. He then took a teaching post in Germany in mid-1939.

The outbreak of war changed everything: stranded and desperate, Cooper joined the Waffen-SS. By 1941, he had risen to the rank of lance corporal and was stationed with the Totenkopf Division near Krakow.

Francis Maton, a British POW, recalled the SS NCO boasting of the type of actions he was party to. Cooper was leading a squad of Ukrainians during a purge of the Krakow ghetto. In the top flat were 20 or so Jews being held at gun point by his men who gleefully explained to Cooper that "they had found a new way of killing Jews. This was done simply by opening the window wide



Mugshot of Thomas Cooper taken in 1945 before his trial for high treason at the Old Bailey in January 1946.

and two men each grabbing an arm and a leg and flinging the Jew through the open window. The small children and babies followed their parents".

After the war, Cooper was sentenced to hang for high treason, but received a last-minute reprieve and was given a life sentence instead.



Cooper boasted about the murder of Jews in the Krakow ghetto that he was supposed to help guard.

TOTENKOPF DIVISION

► number of the Germans. On 27th June 1944, Field Marshal Walter Model replaced the disgraced Busch as the commander of Army Group Centre. Model extricated the remains of the group and asked for reinforcements to establish a new line of defence along the Vistula river in Poland.

IN JULY, THE newly fitted 5th SS Panzer Division Wiking marched from its SS training camp east of Dębica towards Białystok, while Totenkopf and Großdeutschland were transported to Siedlce. The three panzer divisions combined to form IV SS Panzer Corps under General Herbert Otto Gille. Totenkopf was at the forefront of the new formation, helping to defend the strategically important city of Grodno, once again in the face of numerically superior Soviet forces.

ON 14TH AUGUST, 1944, fighting broke out around the area north-east of Warsaw when units from Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky's Belorussian Front attacked IV Panzer Corps. For a full

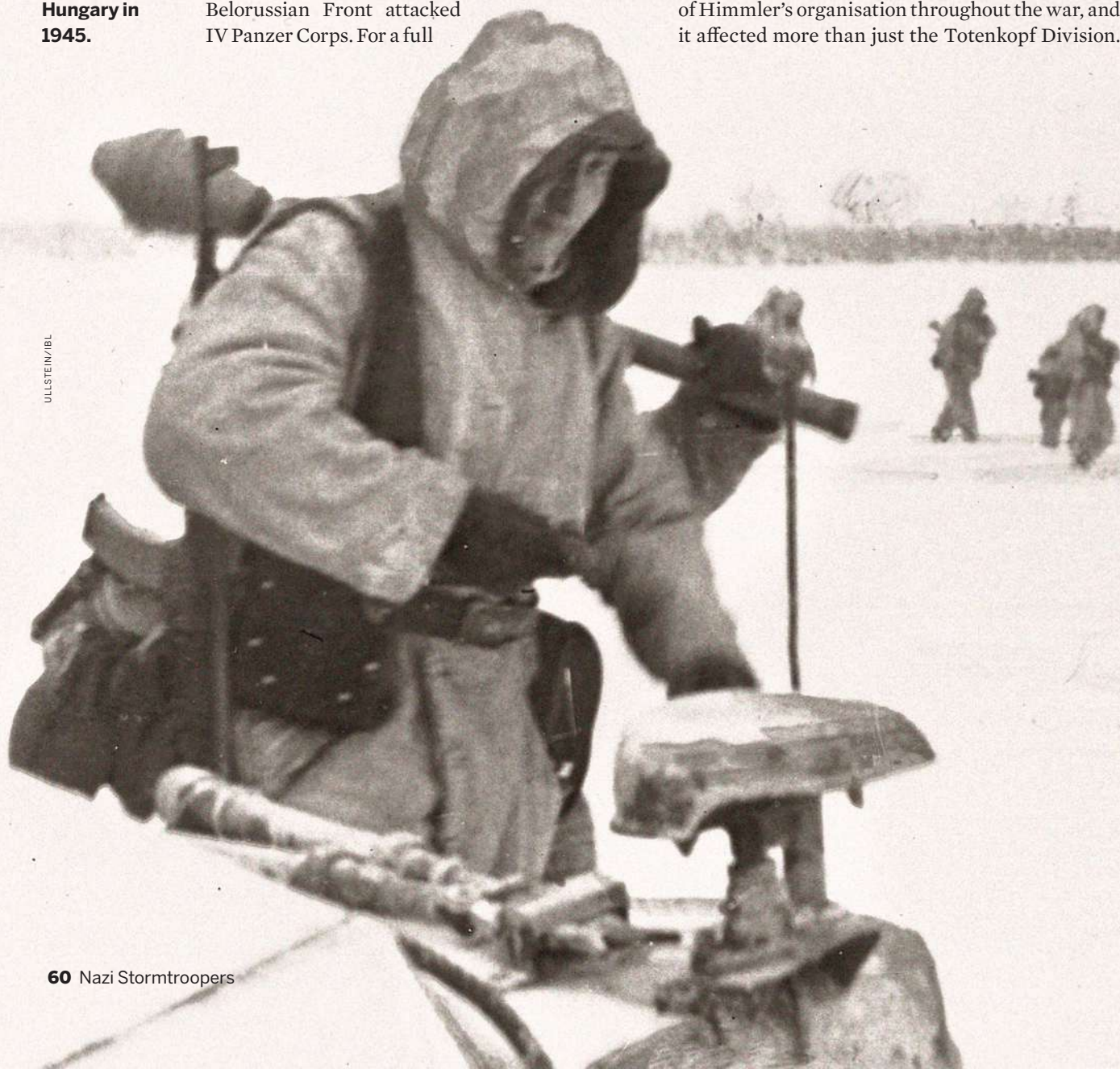
week, Totenkopf and Wiking repelled attacks from 15 Soviet sniper divisions and five Panzer brigades. During the renewed Soviet offensive against Warsaw, Totenkopf mounted a skilled counter-attack on 11th September to retake the district of Praga and, miraculously, break the massed Soviet attacks.

Totenkopf crowned its remarkable efforts in the region when it, together with Wiking and the 19th Army Division, held off the Soviet 5th Guards Tank Army during its attack on Modlin, causing the Red Army to abandon new offensive actions in the area.

By this time, the Death Head Division, with its remarkable ability to both attack and defend, had earned a solid reputation as one of the most reliable and powerful armoured divisions in the German Armed Forces. At the same time, the force's men continued to be characterised by the SS's institutionalised brutality.

THE ROTATION OF personnel between guard duty at the concentration camps and front-line action with the Waffen-SS was a conscious policy of Himmler's organisation throughout the war, and it affected more than just the Totenkopf Division.

Totenkopf soldiers armed with panzerfaust anti-tank missile launchers and Sturmgewehr 44 rifles advance during Hitler's last offensive in Hungary in 1945.



ULLSTEIN/IBL

However, most of the original camp guards who had been recruited by Totenkopf were already buried in Russia, having fallen at the front in 1942. They were replaced with recruits indoctrinated with an even more cold-blooded ideology. Likewise, the original officer corps had been “shot to pieces” in the inferno on the Eastern Front. They were replaced by leaders with more tactical education. The brutal ideology of the Death Head Division continued, however, probably perpetuated by surviving senior officers.

Operation Spring Awakening, Hitler’s last major offensive of the war, was largely left in the hands of the Waffen-SS divisions. The operation’s goal was to secure the Hungarian oil reserves that lay south of Lake Balaton and drive the Red Army back across the Danube. The operation, which took place in March 1945, saw the highest number of German elite divisions ever assembled for a single operation, and Totenkopf was one of them. After making good progress initially, the muddy terrain and strong Soviet resistance eventually caused the attack to stall. The Red Army regained its footing and, with an overwhelming numerical advantage,

launched a counter-attack that ripped the German forces to shreds.

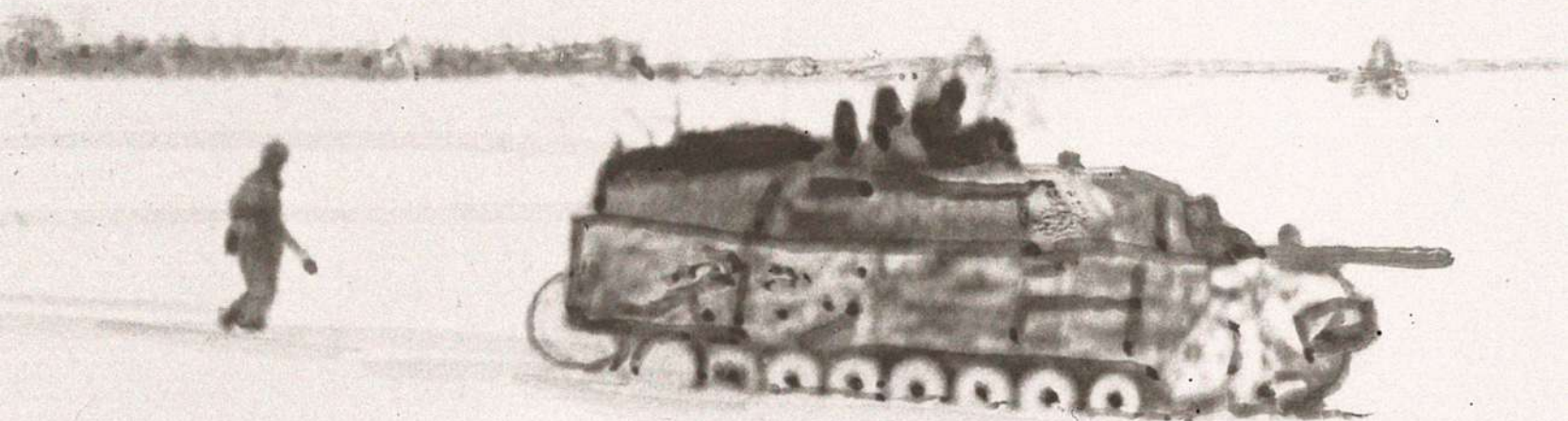
BY MID-APRIL 1945 Germany’s defeat was a fact. Totenkopf was pulled back to help defend Vienna, but the task proved impossible and the division was finally broken.

The last surviving troops of 3rd SS Panzer Division Totenkopf surrendered in May 1945 to US forces. The Americans left them to the mercy of the Soviets. Ironically, as captives of a regime every bit as pitiless and brutal as their own, all that awaited the last Death Head soldiers was the horror of life in a forced labour camp. ★

Lennart Westberg is a military historian.

Further reading:
Soldiers of Destruction.
The SS Death’s Head Division
(1990) by Charles W Sydnor.

**SS ELITE FORCE
LIBERATES MUSSOLINI**



“ALL THAT AWAITED THE LAST DEATH HEAD SOLDIERS WAS THE HORROR OF LIFE IN A FORCED LABOUR CAMP”

Liberation of Mussolini, 1943

SS FORCE'S BOLD RAID

In 1943, Italy's dictator Benito Mussolini was deposed and kidnapped during a coup d'état. His fascist regime was toppled in a single day. In Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler gave a group of special-trained SS men orders to find and free Mussolini. They planned and carried out one of the war's most fearless actions.

Text: **MORTEN RENDSMARK**

On 29th July, 1943, SS officer Otto Skorzeny clicked the heels of his boots together and stretched his right arm to greet Adolf Hitler personally. The meeting took place at *Wolfsschanze* (Wolf's Lair), a complex of camouflaged concrete bunkers that made up the Führer's headquarters in East Prussia.

"I have a mission of the highest importance for you", Hitler said. "Yesterday Mussolini, my friend and our loyal partner in the struggle, was betrayed by his king and arrested by his own compatriots."

The Führer continued: "Mussolini must be rescued, and speedily, otherwise they will deliver him up to the Allies. I therefore entrust you with

this mission; its successful outcome will be of incalculable bearing upon the development of future military operations." Skorzeny had been given a politically delicate mission.

OTTO SKORZENY STOOD 1.95 m (6' 6") tall, and the muscular Austrian was head of the SS-Sonderverband zbV "Friedenthal". This was a small group of carefully selected SS soldiers who Skorzeny had been training since 1942 to carry out espionage and sabotage behind enemy lines.

The Friedenthals were weapons and explosive experts, and many had a technical education and spoke foreign languages fluently. ►



Skorzeny.

"Europe's most dangerous man"

★ Otto Skorzeny was both famous and infamous during the war. The Allies called him "Europe's most dangerous man". They feared, among other things, that he would abduct Allied commander Dwight D

Eisenhower. Skorzeny's facial scar was inflicted during a rapier duel he fought as a student in Vienna before the war. The scar was considered to be a mark of honour and also a sign of courage.



German paratroopers storm the high-altitude Campo Imperatore where Mussolini was held captive.

LIBERATION OF MUSSOLINI

► During training, the elite soldiers had to learn to drive various vehicles including motorcycles, locomotive engines and tanks. They also learned to ride, swim and convincingly adopt false identities. Skorzeny was an engineering graduate from the University of Vienna and an army veteran, playing roles in the invasions of Belgium, Holland and France in 1940 and the Soviet Union in 1941, where he was injured and repatriated. Back in Germany, the Austrian had taken up training the Friedenthals, who were now about to face their first action.

ON 25TH JULY – four days before Skorzeny's meeting with Hitler – Italy's fascist dictator Benito Mussolini had been set aside by a coup d'état. The Italian king Victor Emanuel and Marshal Pietro Badoglio had ordered Italian police to arrest the dictator after a meeting in the royal palace in Rome. Police officers had placed Mussolini into an ambulance and led him to a secret place under tight guard. The official word claimed that Mussolini had



Benito Mussolini at the height of his power.

voluntarily surrendered power to the king and a new government under Badoglio.

The situation in Italy left Nazi Germany extremely vulnerable. Before the coup, both countries had joined forces in the war, but the new Italian government was playing a double game. It was secretly negotiating peace with the British and Americans, its aim to pull the country out of the war. But publicly it continued to assure Hitler that Italy would fight beside its German ally to the end. The "promise" revealed Italy's fear of German reprisals and a possible Nazi occupation of the Italian mainland.

IN GERMANY, HITLER raged over the fact his friend and ally had been removed by coup. He still had German troops in Italy and his immediate thought was to occupy the country by force, locate Mussolini and reinstate him as dictator. But with only around three army divisions to call on, the Führer had to rein in his anger and desire for revenge on the coup

Paratroopers move across the mountain during the operation to free the Italian dictator.

ULLSTEIN BILD/GETTY



Nazi Stormtroopers

plotters. He also feared the Italians would turn against him if he retaliated too violently. But at the same time, the German dictator suspected the king and Badoglio would be negotiating a secret peace with the Allies. This was a serious threat, because if Italy surrendered, the Allies could occupy southern Italy and open another front against Germany. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had even described Italy as “Europe’s soft underbelly”.

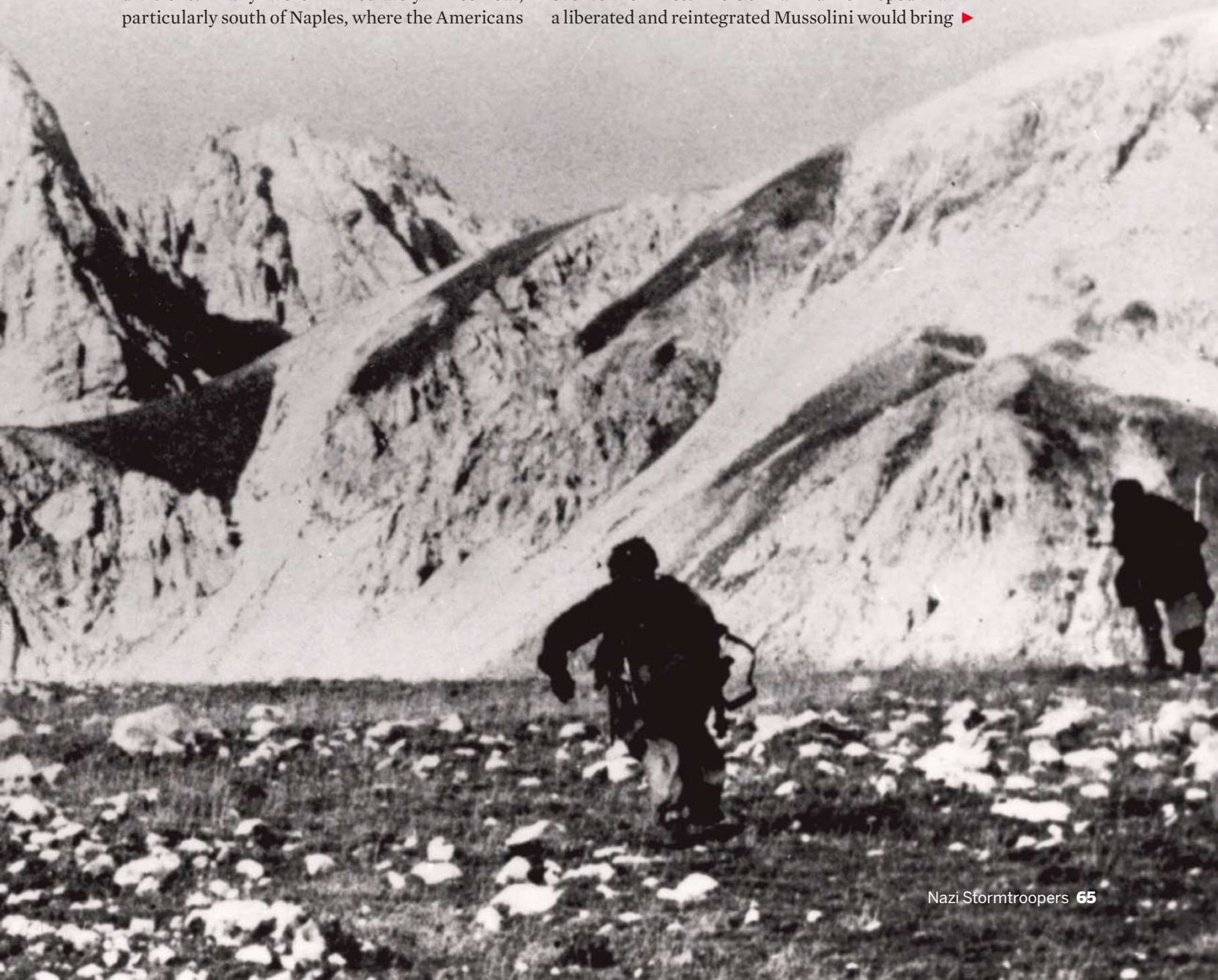
PEACE TALKS BETWEEN the Italians and the Allies took six weeks. The reason for this was that the Allies were initially suspicious of the people behind the coup who had previously supported Mussolini. But on 9th September, they signed a ceasefire agreement, where Italy surrendered unconditionally. The country now officially stood on the side of the Allies in the war.

Hitler swiftly reinforced his presence in Italy, increasing German troops from three to eight divisions. Many were immediately in combat, particularly south of Naples, where the Americans

“THE FÜHRER HOPED THAT A LIBERATED AND REINTEGRATED MUSSOLINI WOULD BRING ITALY BACK OVER TO THE NAZIS.”

had landed. Other German forces moved to disarm one million Italian soldiers. The king and Badoglio fled from Rome to southern Italy to come under Allied protection. The Germans had now occupied northern and central Italy while the British and US were laying claim to southern Italy. Somewhere in this storm, Mussolini remained under the guard of the Carabinieri, Italy’s military police. Badoglio had given them a clear order: Mussolini must be shot if the Germans tried to free him.

It was a nightmare situation for Skorzeny. His reputation with Hitler depended on whether it would be possible to find and free Mussolini before the Italian ex-dictator was shot or handed over to the Allies. The German Führer hoped that a liberated and reintegrated Mussolini would bring ►



LIBERATION OF MUSSOLINI

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101-567-1503C-31/TONI SCHNEIDERS/CC-BY-SA 3.0



German gliders were built for surprise attacks. They landed on the ground on long metal rods. Each aircraft carried ten men including the pilot. But this was the first time they had landed on a mountain.

- Italy back over to the Nazis. Immediately after his meeting with Hitler on 29th July, Skorzeny travelled to Italy where he set to work with German agents and General Kurt Student, who was commander of Germany's paratroopers. They had tracked down Mussolini, who was interned on the small island of Ponza just off Naples, but by the time the Germans arrived, the former dictator had been removed.

Throughout August, conflicting rumours circulated as to where Il Duce was being held. Many had been spread by Italian intelligence service agents who were loyal to Badoglio and the king. For weeks, the Germans pursued false trails.

DUE TO THE complicated political situation in Italy in August 1943, Skorzeny and Student did not use arrests and torture against the Italians. Instead, they made queries with German soldiers stationed around the country, and it was mainly via these that they gained intelligence. One of these pieces of information came from the small island of La Maddalena off Sardinia where a Russian naval officer in the area had heard rumours that Mussolini was being held in a large villa there.

One of Skorzeny's men, whose name was Robert Warger and who spoke fluent Italian, was sent to the island disguised as a sailor to talk to the locals. He challenged some Italians to bet on where Badoglio had hidden Mussolini.

A local fruit supplier accepted the wager and revealed that Mussolini was in a secluded villa.

“THE GERMANS WOULD HAVE TO LAND ON A ROCKY MOUNTAIN RIDGE USING GLIDERS”

AFTER THE BATTLE



Hotel Campo Imperatore – from the front door, the German leader could see Mussolini through one of the two windows where he was held captive.

Warger spied on the villa and found that the site was guarded by around 150 Carabinieri. In addition, a Red Cross seaplane was anchored near to the villa.

Skorzeny immediately began planning an operation that would involve seaplanes and high-speed motorboats. But before he could get his men, vehicles and equipment into place, Mussolini was again moved.

Just after Warger had found the villa, the Red Cross plane disappeared, and the guard was cut to just a few men. The bird had been spirited away from under Skorzeny's nose, and the Italian word “fiasco” rang in his ears. The search would have to begin again; Mussolini could once again be anywhere.

IN GERMANY, HITLER'S propaganda minister Goebbels began to doubt whether Mussolini would ever be found and liberated. For Goebbels, it would have been a welcome propaganda coup if they were to free Mussolini. In the summer, a major German offensive on the Eastern Front had gone badly wrong, and German troops were despondent. At the same time British and Americans advanced in southern Italy, and their bombers had left the German port city of Hamburg in ruins. Pessimism also took hold of the propaganda minister, whose job it was to keep up the German fighting spirit.

Around the beginning of September, the Germans struck gold again when one of their surveillance units intercepted an interesting message in Italian: “Security measures around Gran Sasso completed. Cueli”. The message was duly sent on to General Student's headquarters in Frascati, outside Rome.

Student initially dismissed the message because of earlier false trails, but when he and Skorzeny inspected a water aerodrome on Lake Bracciano to

SS landed in the mountains

After the war, Otto Skorzeny designed a map of the mountain ridge, the ski hotel and the gliders' landings. It shows the course of everything that happened.

1 At 14.00, the first plane landed by SS commander Skorzeny lands. The plane glides over the mountain ridge and stops just 15 metres from the ski hotel on a slight slope in front of it. From there the first SS paratroopers storm the hotel.

3 A propeller aircraft lands and takes up position on the mountain ridge. The plane heads down the hillside and leaves at 15.50 with Mussolini and Skorzeny on board. From there, Mussolini flies to a German base near Rome and on to Austria the same day.

2 Skorzeny runs behind the hotel (dotted line). He climbs up on the platform in front of the building. There he sees Mussolini in a window on the third floor. Then he storms the entrance, knocks over a pair of guards and runs into the foyer. Eventually, more aircraft arrive with German paratroopers who occupy the plateau.

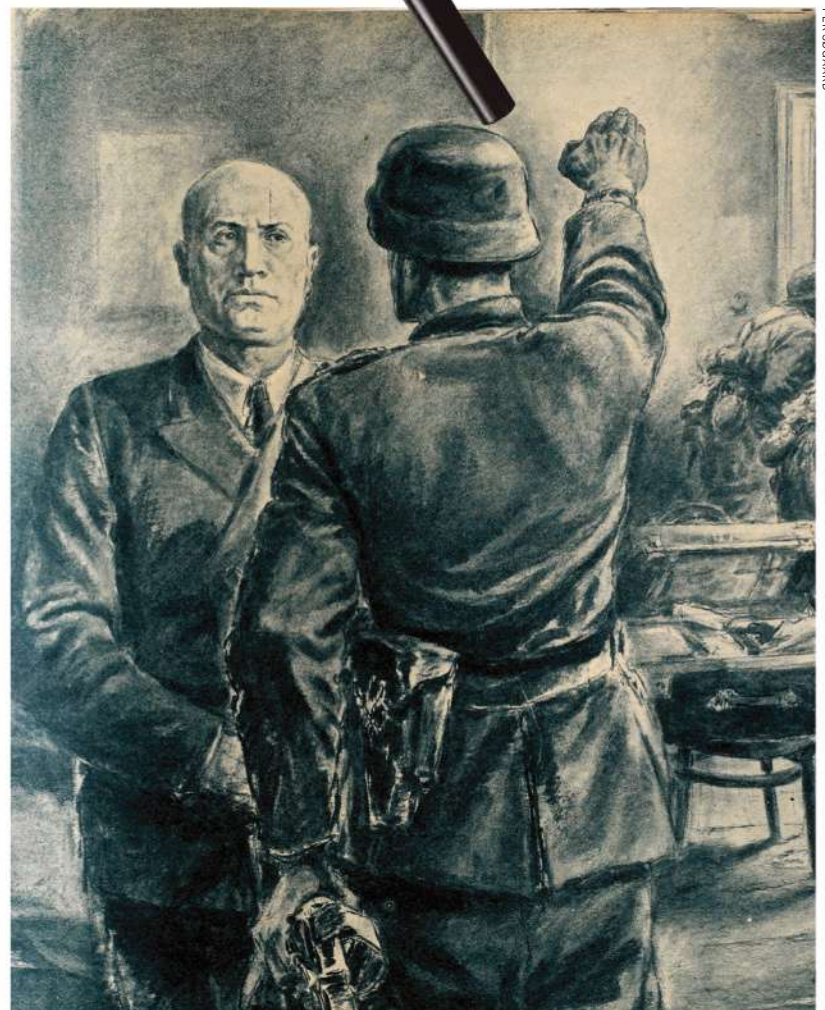
the north of Rome on 4th September, the commander heard from an eyewitness who saw an Italian Red Cross seaplane land on Bracciano and then, shortly afterwards, an ambulance drive off in a convoy of other cars.

STUDENT IMMEDIATELY CONNECTED the dots linking the Red Cross seaplane on the Bracciano lake with the villa at La Maddalena, at which point the radio transmission also came back into his mind.

Gran Sasso forms part of the Apennine mountain range that runs down the Italian peninsula. On a plateau 2,100 metres above sea level lay the ski hotel Campo Imperatore, accessible only by cable car. The height at Gran Sasso was critical: the paratrooper commander knew that the air was too thin and wind conditions too unstable to allow paratroopers to be dropped over the hotel. The cable car couldn't be used either – the journey up to the hotel would take at least 10 minutes, plenty of time for them to be spotted by the Italians.

Both Student and Skorzeny knew that surprise was essential. The guards had to be overpowered before they could get to the ex-dictator. Only one very special kind of operation could liberate Mussolini. The Germans would have to land on a rocky mountain ridge using gliders. The planes consisted of metal rods covered with canvas, and during a landing, the machines slid on long metal rods along the hull to come to a halt. But the planes were designed to land on a relatively flat grassy surface, not a sloping mountain crest.

UNDETERRED, SKORZENY AND Student immediately began to plan their assault on Hotel



Four minutes after landing, Skorzeny stood in front of Mussolini. "The Führer sent me", he said. The drawing is taken from the German Propaganda paper *Signal*, which featured the operation in great detail.

LIBERATION OF MUSSOLINI



The plane that will take Mussolini is prepared for take-off down the rocky mountain ridge. The paratroopers and SS soldiers look jubilant with some Italian prisoners who have surrendered.



Mussolini is followed to the plane, designed for a pilot and one passenger. In spite of this, SS commander Skorzeny also climbs on board.

► Campo Imperatore. They sent to Germany for gliders, while Skorzeny – along with his adjutant Karl Radl – climbed aboard a bomber equipped for aviation photography. But the camera did not work. When the bomber flew over the mountain at a height of 5,000 metres, Skorzeny opened a hatch and leaned his upper body out into the ice-cold air. Using a handheld camera, Skorzeny snapped pictures of the plateau where Campo Imperatore was located.

When the images were developed, however, the quality was so poor that Skorzeny and Radl couldn't discern much from them. They were able to determine that the hotel appeared to be on flat ground. Skorzeny's only other form of reference was a tourist brochure from the hotel, but its photos weren't very detailed. Skorzeny was unable to formulate a comprehensive outline of the hotel. He didn't know where doors and entrances were located or how the interior was laid out.

THE AERIAL RECONNAISSANCE of Campo Imperatore took place on 8th September. On the same day, the Allies broadcast radio news that the Italian government had signed a ceasefire agreement, signalling their unconditional surrender. Italy now sided itself with the Allies and became – at least on paper – the Germans' enemies. Time was now scarce for Skorzeny and his men who feared that Mussolini would now be handed to the British and Americans. But the gliders had to be transported from Germany, and would only arrive in Italy on the morning of 12th September.

The plan was that the planes would fly the same day they arrived from Pratica di Mare, a little south of Rome, to Gran Sasso. The trip was calculated at 60 minutes. A few hours earlier, a column of soldiers on motorcycles, cars and trucks would drive to – and then capture – the cable car's base station, located

in the Aquila valley. The glider landing on the mountain and the attack on the cable car station in the valley would need to be synchronised to ensure the Germans didn't lose the element of surprise.

THE GLIDERS WOULD be drawn by propelled aircraft using long steel wire ropes and finally arrived in Italy late in the morning of the 12th. As the gliders arrived at Student's air base, equipment was to be immediately loaded onboard, but their departure was delayed as the air alarm suddenly sounded and Allied bombers attacked the runway. Luckily, none of the aircraft had been hit, and the mission could proceed at 13.00.

10 gliders in all departed from the base, each carrying 10 men including the pilot. Two gliders were manned with Skorzeny's men, while the others housed Student's paratroopers.

Along the way, the flying convoy would have to pass over the foothills of the Apennines through dense cloud. The two gliders leading the way swung around in a big circle to gain altitude before passing over. But the gliders following missed the manoeuvre because they were still inside a cloud bank. It was only when the clouds parted that they discovered the first two aircraft had vanished. In the third was Skorzeny, and when his pilot asked who would now lead the convoy, Skorzeny answered: "We'll take over the lead ourselves!" The remaining gliders fell into line and all flew over the Apennines.

With a knife, Skorzeny cut holes in the glider's canvas to determine how far the convoy had come. Underneath, the commando watched as the motorcycles from the column that were to attack the cable car station made their way up the Aquila valley. Everything had gone to plan so far, except the first two planes had now fallen behind because of their circling manoeuvre in the foothills. Skorzeny's

“THE SOUND OF TEARING CANVAS, GRINDING METAL RODS AND THE SCRAPE OF THE HULL OVER STONY GROUND CUT THROUGH THE CREW’S EARS.”

glider also contained the Italian General Fernando Soleti. The general had agreed to participate in the risky action; his task was to persuade the 200 or so Italian guards to spare Mussolini.

Through scattered clouds, Skorzeny was able to determine that the air convoy was approaching Gran Sasso and the hotel. “Slip the tow ropes!” he shouted to the pilot. The plane that towed Skorzeny’s glider through the air disappeared, leaving just the noise of the wind behind. Both the glider pilot and Skorzeny examined the landing zone. The area looked relatively flat from the aerial photos taken, but now the crew could see its incline was more like a ski slope.

Nevertheless, the pilot set the glider down so it could slide down the slope to a halt. The sound of tearing canvas, grinding metal rods and the scrape of the hull over stony ground cut through the crew’s ears. By chance, the glider – by now almost completely destroyed – stopped just 15 metres from one corner of the hotel. Skorzeny and his men ran out of the airplane door, which had been ripped from its hinges during landing and stormed the hotel. “Hands in the air”, they yelled in Italian to some startled guards. The reluctant General Soleti was ushered out of the plane, shouting with the full force of his lungs, “Don’t shoot!”

SKORZENY THEN RAN through the nearest door, where he discovered a radio operator sitting on a chair. The Austrian kicked the chair from under the Italian and smashed the radio with the butt of his machine gun. The radio room led nowhere, so Skorzeny quickly exited. He then ran around the back of the hotel looking for an entrance. He found a terrace at the end of the wall – a pair of German soldiers lifted him onto it, where he found himself at the front of the hotel. Running along he spotted an unmistakable bald profile in a second-floor window: Mussolini. Skorzeny immediately shouted, “Duce, get away from the window!” The commander feared the former dictator might get caught in any crossfire.

Skorzeny and his SS troops came to the main hotel entrance, where a couple of Italian soldiers were standing guard with machine guns. But ▶



The flimsy Fieseler Storch takes off from Gran Sasso. The pilot deliberately dives beyond the ridge as the plane needs momentum to rise.

LIBERATION OF MUSSOLINI

▶ before the Italians could react, they were tossed aside by the tall, muscular Skorzeny. Not a single shot had been fired. Inside the foyer, the Italians panicked. Any carabinieri who tried to block Skorzeny were pushed aside and held back by the SS commandos.

Skorzeny now ran up the stairs with one of his officers at his heel. When the Germans reached the second floor, Skorzeny passed through a door to one of the hotel rooms. In the room was Mussolini guarded by two Italians, whom Skorzeny's officer quickly bundled out into the hallway. "Duce, the Führer has sent me! You're free", Skorzeny told Mussolini. The ex-dictator embraced his rescuer before answering: "I knew my friend Adolf wouldn't desert me."

ONLY FOUR MINUTES had passed from the second Skorzeny ran out of the glider to the moment he stood before Mussolini. Outside, the other gliders had landed or were in the process of landing. From an Italian perspective, it had been a terrifying sight because the gliders emerged suddenly from the clouds before landing quickly with a shattering sound. The German troops then swiftly stormed both the hotel and the upper cable car station. Everywhere, Italian carabinieri were so paralysed by shock that they surrendered without battle. At the same time, the motorised German column had seized control of the cable car station in the valley – here, two Italians were killed during the battle. On the mountain one of the gliders crashed to the ground through a sudden gust of wind. Several on board were severely injured, but all survived.

A Fieseler Storch – a flimsy single propeller plane designed for one pilot and one passenger – arrived at Gran Sasso at 15.00. The plane would deliver Mussolini to the airport at Pratica di Mare, but Skorzeny insisted on flying in the small plane too. The commando had no intention of letting his



Mussolini lands in Germany after his liberation, where Hitler receives him. Soon after, Mussolini becomes dictator in Northern Italy. But he has lost his former charisma.

prize out of his sight. The pilot, who only managed to land with difficulty on the mountain ridge, had other ideas, refusing to take anyone other than Mussolini. He pointed out that the Italian weighed more than the average passenger, and that Skorzeny was also too heavy.

The fact the plane would have to lift off from a rocky hillside made it dangerous enough with just a single passenger onboard, but after some discussion, Skorzeny persuaded the pilot to take both him and Duce. Mussolini sat down in the passenger seat, while Skorzeny squeezed himself into the cramped space behind the seats.

THE STORCH HAD decent suspension, but not much horsepower. It set off bumping down the hillside easily enough, but suddenly the pilot spotted a ditch running across the slope. He pressed the throttle as if to take off and the plane "jumped" over the ditch, after which the wheels once again bumped over the slope. The German soldiers on the mountain stared nervously at the plane as it reached a point where the slope became even steeper. They watched the plane swoop over the edge, but just as they feared the worst, the plane lifted its nose and continued down the valley.

The pilot had consciously performed a nosedive to generate enough speed to take off. Yet again Skorzeny had taken a bold risk, almost insane.

When the Storch landed at the German air base Pratica di Mare in Rome, Mussolini and Skorzeny boarded a transport plane bound for Vienna Airport that night. From here, the odd couple travelled to

"THEN HITLER HIMSELF CALLED, PROMOTING SKORZENY FROM HAUPTSTURMFÜHRER (CAPTAIN) TO STURMBANNFÜHRER (MAJOR)"

the upmarket Hotel Imperial, where they were initially rejected by the receptionist. But when the concierge learned they'd reserved rooms under the name of Mussolini, he quickly served them. The deposed dictator immediately went to bed, but Skorzeny stayed up to celebrate his success with a glass of wine. Soon after, the phone rang. The first to congratulate him was SS chief Heinrich Himmler.

Then Hitler himself called, promoting Skorzeny from *hauptsturmführer* (captain) to *sturmbannführer* (major). Later, Hermann Göring rang, and a German colonel in Vienna arrived at Hotel Imperial to personally deliver the Iron Cross military order to the commando. Otto Skorzeny had become the Nazis' most famous war hero – and even the British would express a reluctant admiration for his bold and successful rescue operation.

SKORZENY CONTINUED TO carry out special assignments during the war. During Hitler's last offensive in the Ardennes in 1944 he created chaos behind American lines. Skorzeny and his men were disguised as American soldiers. They spread false information and turned the road signs so that the US columns were disoriented. It caused confusion among the Americans, which delayed any opposition.

At one point, the Americans feared that Skorzeny and his men intended to kidnap Dwight D Eisenhower, the Allied commander. This led to the security at the general's headquarters being ramped up. But it turned out that the Allies overreacted and Skorzeny had no plans to carry out such an action.

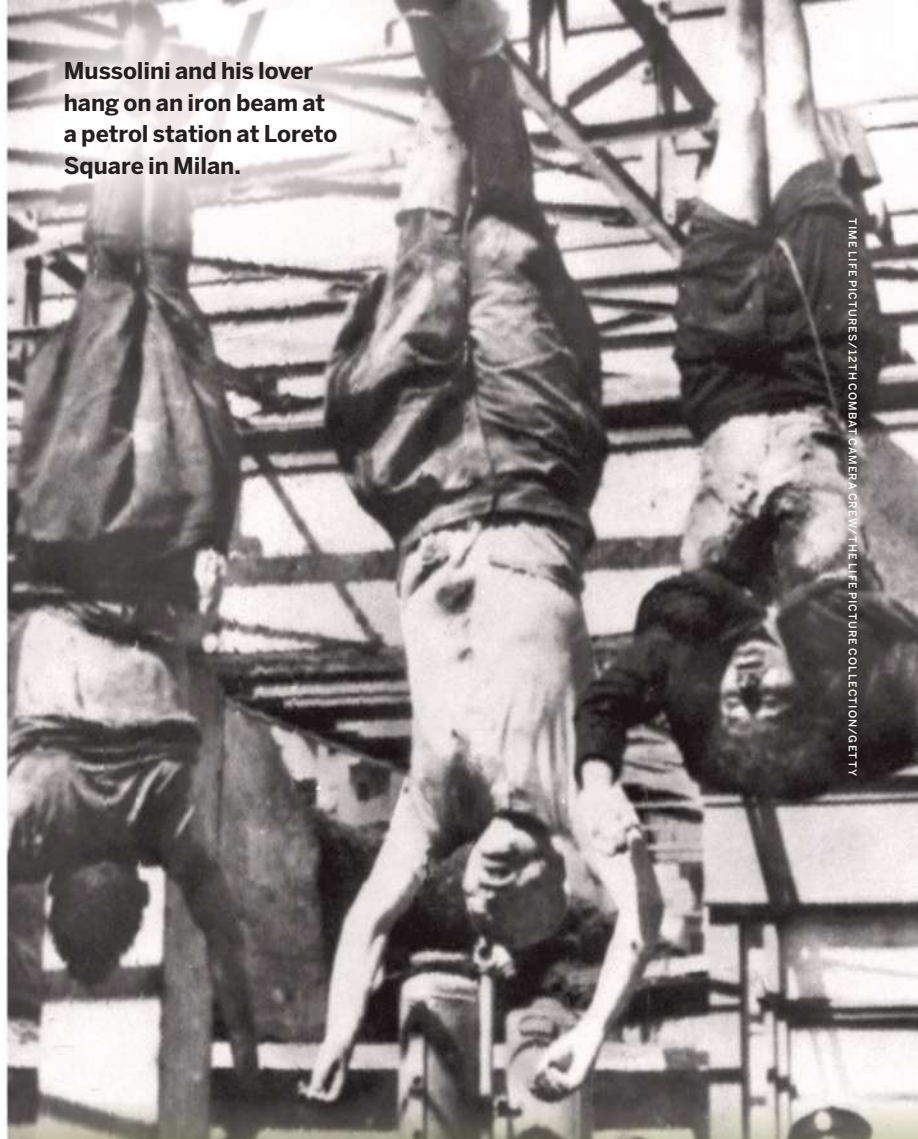
By the end of April 1945 Berlin was falling. Hitler was still in his bunker in the city, which was attacked by the Russians from all sides. Skorzeny was ready with a plane so he could take Hitler to safety. But instead, Hitler ended up committing suicide, and Skorzeny ended up as a prisoner of war of the British and Americans.

After the war, Skorzeny was accused of war crimes, but he was eventually acquitted. He was still held captive in an "denazification" camp. From there he escaped to Argentina in 1948 where he worked for dictator Juan and his wife Evita Perón. He started a relationship with Evita, but when she died, he moved to General Franco's fascist Spain. From there he helped Nazis in other countries to live underground. In 1975, Skorzeny became ill and died in his own bed in Madrid. ★

Morten Rendsmark is a military historian.

Further reading: **Hitler's Raid to Save Mussolini** (2005) by Greg Annussek ★ **The Memoirs of the Most Dangerous Man in Europe** (1997) by Otto Skorzeny

Mussolini and his lover hang on an iron beam at a petrol station at Loreto Square in Milan.



TIME LIFE PICTURES/12TH COMBAT CAMERA CREW/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY

Italians strung up Mussolini

★ After his liberation from captivity, Mussolini was reinstated as a dictator. But by April 1945 it was all over. He was shot by partisans.

After the Germans freed Mussolini in September 1943, he again became a dictator in Italy. There he created a new fascist republic with the town of Salò as its capital. But in practice he was Hitler's puppet. In addition, he was a broken man and knew both that fascism in Italy was at an end while the war was lost. On 27th April, 1945, disguised as a German soldier, he tried to escape to neutral Switzerland. But Italian partisans discovered him and for the second time, the dictator was captured

by his own countrymen. This time they showed no mercy. Along with his mistress, Claretta Petacci, Mussolini was sentenced to death, and the couple was then shot.

On 29th April – the day before Hitler committed suicide in Berlin – Mussolini's dead body was strung up for public view in Loreto Square in Milan.

During the last two years of the war, Italy was a battlefield where the Allies slowly advanced throughout the country. The Germans took advantage of the mountains and the rivers to create defence lines, and the fighting stretched on and on. German troops only surrendered in May 1945.

The attack on Via Rasella, 1944

SS'S UGLY REPRISALS

Castel
Sant'
Angelo

Text:
**ESKIL
FAGERSTRÖM**

The bombing at Via Rasella in Rome in March 1944 was the most controversial chapter of the Italian partisan movement. While nearly 50 German soldiers were killed, the reprisals were terrible – 350 innocent Italians were executed.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101-312-0983-10/KOCH/CC-BY-SA

A dead German soldier is covered up after the attack. In total, 46 Germans from the SS Police Regiment Bozen were killed on Via Rasella in Rome.

**“BLOOD, BODY PARTS
AND LIMBS WERE
SPREAD THROUGHOUT
VIA RASELLA”**



Rosario Bentivegna, doctoral student and partisan from Rome, was responsible for the bomb. He packed it himself: 18 kilograms of explosives and a load of scrap iron was loaded on to a rubbish cart. Just before 14.00 the cart was in place on Via Rasella. It was close to Rome's political centre and the German occupation troops' headquarters on the parade Via Veneto.

The partisans hailed from Rome's communist resistance movement, *Gruppo d'Azione Patriotica* (GAP), and had planned a major attack on the German troops that had occupied Rome for the past six months. One of them, Mario Fiorentini, had noticed that a military police force marched along the narrow alley every day.



Rosario Bentivegna was responsible for the bomb.

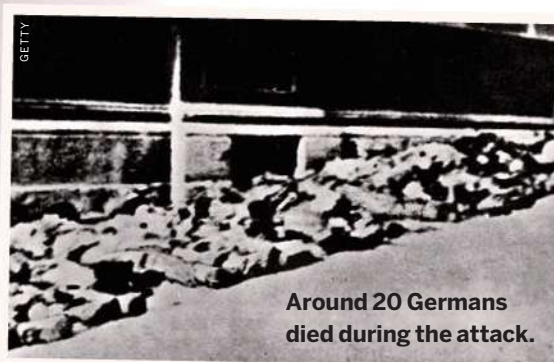
The soldiers belonged to the SS Police Regiment Bozen and used the street when returning to their barracks at the Palazzo del Viminale. They could hardly be called an elite force; they were recently conscripted middle-aged German-speaking Italians from South Tyrol. In Rome they were subject to SS command.

At the top of Via Quattro Fontane, near the magnificent Baroque Palazzo Barberini, there were no side streets leading to Via Rasella, which meant that the Germans would be caught in a trap.

BENTIVEGNA CHAIN-SMOKED AS he waited for the cart. In the side streets there were another 15 partisans ready. First the bomb would explode then the company would be attacked with grenades and machine guns.

But where were the soldiers? At 15.35 not a single German had appeared.

Eventually, the tramping of military boots and resounding voices from 156 men in uniform was ▶



Around 20 Germans died during the attack.

THE ATTACK ON VIA RASELLA

The battle for Italy

10TH JULY, 1943:

Allied troops land in Sicily.

19TH JULY:

Rome is bombed. About 3,000 people die.

24TH-25TH JULY:

The Fascist Grand Council deposes Benito Mussolini. Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio is appointed new head of state.



La Stampa
26th July,
1943.

3RD SEPTEMBER:

Allied forces land on the Italian mainland. On the same day, a peace agreement is secretly negotiated between Badoglio's government and the Allies.

8TH SEPTEMBER:

the peace agreement is made public.

The war has turned – Rome is bombed. The bomb camera from an Allied B-17 Flying Fortress shows how the bombs hit the capital on 19th July, 1943.

► heard down the hill. When the column had reached about halfway, Bentivegna lit the fuse. Then he quickly walked the few steps up to Via Quattro Fontane, where his girlfriend Carla Capponi waited with a change of clothes for him.

AT 15.47 THE bomb exploded with a loud bang that could be heard throughout the city centre. Iron shrapnel flew through the air; plaster broke off the houses' walls. A water pipe split and water poured down the street. Blood, body parts and limbs were spread throughout Via Rasella. Seconds after the explosion, three partisans ran out of a side street, threw three hand grenades and then sprinted off. Other resistance fighters opened fire against the remains of the German column. It was a quick operation: after five minutes, the partisans had disappeared. On the street lay 26 dead and 60

injured German soldiers. Over the next few weeks an additional 20 would die from their injuries.

The Bozen regiment reacted in panic, running in all directions. Others began shooting wildly at the windows of the tall old houses facing the street – they thought they'd been attacked from above.

All the highest-ranking German officers had just celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Italian Fascist party in the dining rooms of the big hotel on Via Veneto, just a few hundred metres away. The generals and colonels rushed down to Via Rasella.

MAJOR GENERAL KURT Mälzer, military commander in Rome, had drunk a lot that day. When he saw the carnage, he began to scream in rage: "Revenge! Revenge!"

This triggered an impromptu clean-up response. German soldiers went from door to door. They



9TH SEPTEMBER:

German army surrounds Rome. The King, Queen and Badoglio escape from the city.

10TH SEPTEMBER:

A volunteer corps occupies positions near the old city wall south of the city centre. For a

couple of hours, they manage to hold off the advancing German infantry, but at 16.00, resistance is broken. 597 people are killed. Germany occupies Rome.

16TH OCTOBER:

Raids on Rome's Jews. 1,259 people, 10 percent of Rome's

Jewish population, are captured and deported to Auschwitz. Only 16 of them would return two years later.

26TH OCTOBER:

The first major partisan attack in central Rome. Barracks and guards are targeted.

“[MÄLZER] BEGAN TO SCREAM IN RAGE: ‘REVENGE! REVENGE!’”

arrested everyone they could find and lined them up against a tall fence. Mälzer was an army officer directly under Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, commander of the German troops in Italy. However, the one who really had the power in occupied Rome was not Mälzer, but the head of the SS troops, SS-Obersturmbannführer Herbert Kappler.

Kappler also went to Via Rasella, where Mälzer granted him permission to take command. He halted the indiscriminate shooting, mistreatment and house searches. Those men arrested on the spot were held inside the basement of the interior ministry until further notice.

It was by far the biggest partisan attack in Italy – carried out in daylight in the centre of the city – and news quickly reached Germany and Adolf Hitler.

He gave orders to retaliate in the most brutal way: the whole area around Via Rasella would be burned and its residents executed. For each dead soldier – of which there were now 32 – between 30 and 50 Italian prisoners would die.

BENITO MUSSOLINI HAD governed Italy for over 20 years using a mix of rhetoric, terror and propaganda. But in 1943 his time in power was almost at an end. 200,000 Italians had already been killed in the Soviet Union, the Balkans and in North Africa. Another million were prisoners of war. The fact that the fortunes of war had definitely turned became even more apparent when the first Allied troops landed on Sicily on 10th July, 1943.

A week later, Rome was bombed – also clear evidence of the failure of the fascist's inability to defend the country, just like the Vatican's futile attempt to keep “The Eternal City” out of the war.

The targets for Allied air attacks were the railway stations. But the planes flew high to avoid Italian air defence and accuracy wasn't great. The train



Major General Kurt Mälzer, commander of Rome.



Herbert Kappler, Head of SS forces in Rome.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD101:311-0926-08/
FRASS/CC-BY-SA 3.0



Soldiers belonging to the SS's police regiment had green uniforms instead of the characteristic grey ones. Poster from that time.

station was hit, but so were the areas surrounding it. Thousands of civilians were killed and injured.

On 24th July, the Fascist Grand Council met for the first time in several years. On the table was a proposal to take command of the Italian forces from Mussolini – the motion was passed at the meeting.

THE FOLLOWING DAY the dictator was secretly taken to Ponza, an island off the east coast of Italy. The new commander-in-chief was Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio. But the political situation was unstable. In the south, Allied troops advanced. The Germans remained in the north. In the middle, Badoglio's was both a military and morally weak regime and included the now-compromised and unpopular royal house. Badoglio quickly contacted the Allies and on 8th September, a ceasefire agreement was announced.

The city was now completely open. Would the Allies take Rome? In the absence of any Allied ►

THE ATTACK ON VIA RASELLA

17TH DECEMBER:

A partisan offensive is launched against German targets in Rome. An officer is shot and 16 German soldiers are killed.

19TH DECEMBER:

A bold attack is made on the Grand Hotel Flora, on Rome's Via

Veneto, which houses German military commanders and is therefore strictly guarded. Four GAP partisans (including one woman) managed to get past the barriers. Two bombs explode and destroy most of the first floor of the hotel, killing several Germans.



Partisans' political branch symbol:
Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale.

28TH DECEMBER:

12 German soldiers die when Rome's city prison is bombed. Imprisoned partisans cheer.

22 JANUARY, 1944:

The Allies land troops along the coast of Anzio and Nettuno south-east of Rome.



Partisans often used nail mats that would puncture German car tyres.

► advance, Kesselring acted instead. On the evening of 8th September, Germans surrounded the city. Early in the morning of 9th September, Badoglio and the royal house fled from the city on the last open road east over the mountains.

In Rome, a provisional resistance movement gathered. They had the city to themselves for a day until – after a short hesitation – German soldiers advanced up Via Appia on 10th September and crushed the quickly mobilised volunteer defence.

The autumn and spring of 1943-44 were dark times for Rome. The city lacked food and water, it was forbidden to ride a bike, send telegraphs and make calls outside the city. No one was allowed to leave the city, stay with friends and – of course –

listen to Allied radio broadcasts or hide refugees. On 16th October, a major raid was conducted in Rome's Jewish ghetto. 1,259 Jews were arrested put on trains and sent to Auschwitz. Only 16 survived.

IN THE AUTUMN of 1943, a resistance movement began to take shape in Rome. Communists in *Bandiera Rossa* (Red Flag) were strongest. The partisans' plan was to make the city centre unsafe, which would force the Germans to relay all troops and transport to the city's outskirts, where they would be an easy target for both Allied air strikes and partisan raids.

One of the most common – and effective – attacks was carried out with strong nail mats.



BUNDESARCHIV, BILD101-312-0983-05/KOCH/CC-BY-SA 3.0

German soldiers and Italian collaborators round up civilians in front of Palazzo Barberini after the attack. Many of the civilians were later murdered in the quarry at Fosse Ardeatine.

23RD MARCH:

The bomb attack on Via Rasella. Around 30 German soldiers die immediately.

24TH MARCH:

Massacre in Fosse Ardeatine. 335 Italian prisoners are arrested by Rome's SS forces.

A SdKfz 7 Zugkraftwagen with 3.7-cm FlaK36 in Rome in 1944.



23RD MAY:

Operation Diadem: Allied forces break out of the beachhead in Anzio and head to Rome, about 50 kilometres away.

4TH JUNE:

US troops under General Clark liberate Rome.

When German trucks drove over them, the tyres were punctured and entire convoys were forced to stop. While stationary, they could be attacked by coordinated Allied aircraft raids.

In the centre, German barracks and guards were attacked. During the Christmas season, activity escalated with a series of minor attacks around Via Veneto, an important symbolic centre for the German administration of the city.

HITLER'S INITIAL ORDER had called for 50 Italians to be killed for each German following the bomb. But by the time the final order was issued on 23rd March, the quota had been reduced: now it would be 10 Italians for each dead German soldier.

"GERMAN BARRACKS AND GUARDS ARE TARGETED"

The SS garrison had just one day to execute the order. In SS headquarters, Kappler worked through the night completing his death list; a list that had now grown to 320 people, since a further four German soldiers had died from their injuries.

A handful of those already convicted were placed at the top. Ten more were selected from the people picked out randomly along Via Rasella. 16 were collected from detainees in other city prisons. 57 arrested Jews were also in prison – all were added ►



A German truck heads into the famous castle of Castel Sant'Angelo during the occupation.

"I wept as I slowly pedalled home"

"We students, had never done anything more than provide superficial medication – and none of us had seen war – but now we underwent a baptism by fire. At first all we did was clean the wounds for treatment by the doctors, but the number of injured was soon overwhelming and we had to begin to do surgery ourselves... Within a short while we were working up to our ankles in rubble, torn clothing and blood. We worked through that day and night and on through the next. Only at sundown of the second day did I leave, bicycling through the completely levelled streets of San Lorenzo.

"It was a turning point in my life. I had seen the most hideous part of a lost war: the slaughter of the innocents. I wept as I slowly pedalled home. I felt something well within me that I had never felt before, an anger against those who had brought my country and my city to ruin – and a burning passion to make them pay."

Rosario Bentivegna, partisan, about his experiences during the bombing of Rome in the summer of 1943. Bentivegna led the attacks on Via Rasella.



US soldiers on Sherman tanks and jeeps roll into Rome on 4th June, 1944.

► to the list. A request led to more being provided from the fascist civilian police in Rome along with Pietro Koch, the head of a feared paramilitary fascist militia who hunted down resistance fighters and US agents.

Early in the morning of 24th March, the day after the attack, the list was ready: serious offenders, civilians, petty criminals and Jews aged between 15 to 70, from all social classes.

One thing they had in common was that they were innocent when it came to the attack at Via Rasella.

Although Kappler had served five years in the SS, he had never killed anyone before. In the morning he told his subordinates about the task that awaited them. Everyone had to participate, including the officers. It would not be “good for morale” if they didn’t, Kappler explained. None of them refused and no one protested.

A COUPLE OF weeks earlier, an informer tipped off the Germans that Italian army vehicles were hidden in an old quarry a few kilometres south of the city centre, on one of the old roads to the coast, Via Ardeatine. One of Kappler’s men proposed the quarry: an isolated spot with a grave that could be sealed off after the job was done.

Around 15.30 on 24th March, a dozen lorries with their prisoners rolled into the old quarry. Two by two, hands tied behind their backs, they climbed down into the tunnel system where they were forced onto their knees and shot in the head. After

“NEW PRISONERS WERE FORCED TO CLIMB OVER THE DEAD BODIES.”

a while, the tunnels started to fill and new prisoners were forced to climb over the dead bodies. Some SS men refused to shoot, but, as Kappler later testified in the war trial, he provided “fatherly support” so the men could fulfil their duty. Bottles of brandy were passed around.

At 20.00, after five hours of killing, 335 people had died in the tunnels.



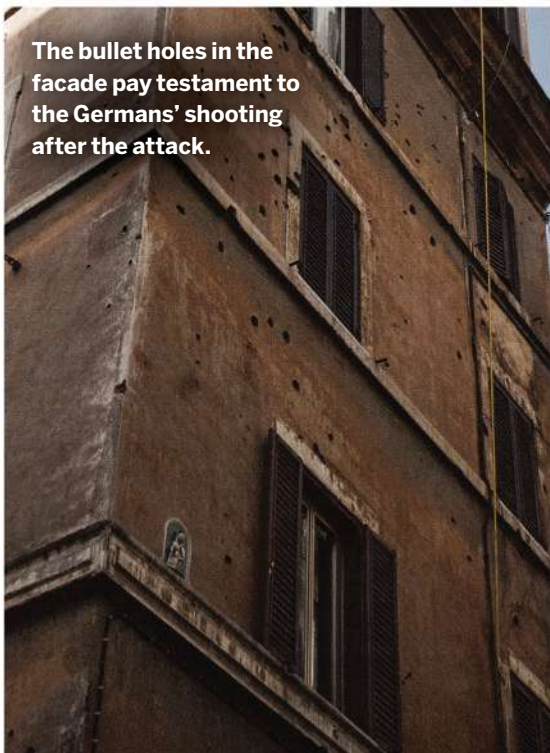
Michele Di Verol was 15 years when he was killed.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, the newspapers in Rome published a press release from the state-owned news agency. It was told that “Badoglio communist elements” had attacked and killed 32 German soldiers on Via Rasella and that an investigation had been initiated to find the culprits.

“Nobody shall sabotage unpunished the renewed Italo-German cooperation. The German command therefore, has given orders that for every dead German, ten Badoglio-Communists shall be shot. The order has already been carried out.”

In Rome, distress and terror increased during the spring of 1944. A lack of bread led to riots. Several resistance fighters and political opponents were taken, torture continued unabated and more and more people were killed. Rumours began to circulate about the terrible thing that had happened in the quarry at Via Ardeatine. In late

THE ATTACK ON VIA RASELLA



The bullet holes in the facade pay testament to the Germans' shooting after the attack.

ESKIL FAGERSTRÖM



Attorney General Attilio Ascarelli led the work to identify the bodies.



ESKIL FAGERSTRÖM

Today Fosse Ardeatine, the old quarry where the massacre was carried out, is a memorial.

winter, the Italian front between the Allies and Germans was at a standstill. Finally, on 11th May an offensive began from the south with the start of Operation Diadem. On 18th May, Monte Cassino was taken. It took the lives of just over 50,000 Allied and 20,000 German soldiers.

Early on 23rd May, 1944 almost 1,500 heavy artillery guns were fired at the front south of Rome. At the same time, bombers attacked Kesselring's headquarters and German fortifications along the Gustav line, which crossed Italy.

ON THE SAME day, troops finally broke out of Anzio, where 130,000 Allied soldiers had been trapped for several months. The last days of May and early days of June saw small towns on the plain south of Rome fall, one by one. On 4th June, the US, British and French flags were hoisted on Capitoline Hill: Rome had been liberated.

Rosario Bentivegna, commander of the attack on Via Rasella, was back in the city for the first time in several months. After the attack he had fought with partisans in the mountains, but now he would help resistance fighters oversee the German retreat.

An increasing number of Rome's population travelled to Fosse Ardeatine, a few miles south of the city centre, to mourn their dead who lay buried under the sand.

In the summer heat of 1944, work started to dig out the buried tunnels and autopsy the bodies from the massacre. Decomposition was already well underway, and many bodies had their heads shot

off. After being carried out, attorney general Attilio Ascarelli managed to identify 320 out of 335 victims.

THE ATTACK ON Via Rasella and the massacre of Fosse Ardeatine continued to characterise Italian post-war history. Some believe that the partisans had a share of the responsibility for the brutal reprisal killings. They should have realised that the Germans' revenge would be cruel. And could the massacre of innocents have been avoided if they had surrendered themselves to the occupying power?

The Communist Party and partisan groups have always defended the attack. Those on the right, however, have always regarded Via Rasella as an act of pure terrorism.

It's a strange and somewhat unpleasant experience to go up Via Rasella today. Some of the buildings still house the bullet holes following the German shooting. The street is also unusually empty of restaurants, cafés or shops. It may be just a coincidence – but for many of Rome's population the place has emotional significance. It's a place of murder.

Fosse Ardeatine became a national monument long ago: a large sandy area that has been excavated along its sides. Inside a light burns and it's cold and damp underground. A memorial plaque honours attorney Attilio Ascarelli alongside the victims – *martyrene*, in Italian – who have been laid to rest under the large public monument. ★

Eskil Fagerström is a journalist and author.



Further reading:
The Order Has Been Carried Out (1976) by Alessandro Portelli ★
The Battle for Rome (2010) by Robert Katz ★
A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance (2014) by Claudio Pavone.

Warsaw's executioner went free after the war

He began the war as an army private, but advanced to SS general. In 1944, his forces murdered tens of thousands of civilians, yet he went free.

Text: **SVANTE SANDBLOM**

On 1st August, 1944 an uprising started in Warsaw. An estimated 150,000 civilians and 10,000 soldiers in the Polish Home Army were killed. In the Wola district where Heinz Reinefarth was in command, tens of thousands of Polish civilians were massacred. Reinefarth was elected mayor after the war and never convicted of war crimes.

How did the former SS general manage to avoid being sentenced for his actions?

Reinefarth graduated as a lawyer in the 1920s from Jena University. He became a member of the Nazi party in 1932 and joined the SS the same year. Prior to the war, he practiced as a lawyer, a knowledge which benefited him when he was later charged with war crimes.

REINEFARTH BEGAN WORLD

War II as a conscripted anti-tank soldier in the Wehrmacht in Poland. During the campaign he was promoted to NCO and after officer training was again promoted to unit commander. During the French campaign he was rewarded with the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross after he'd captured 3,000 French soldiers.

In February 1942 Reinefarth was sent home with serious frostbite. In 1942-43 he conducted investigations for the police before becoming senior SS and police chief in Posen in 1944.

On 1st August, he was promoted to *SS-Gruppenführer* (group leader) during the Warsaw Uprising.

THE FACT IS that before the Warsaw Uprising Reinefarth had only ever commanded a single company at the most. In Warsaw, he took command of the Reinefarth Battle Group, a 4,000-man force that had been convened in haste. It included a battalion from the Dirlewanger Brigade and a regiment from the Kaminski Brigade, two units with reputations for extreme brutality.

The German 9th Army had retreated to the city after Operation Bagration, the Soviet summer offensive.

Reinefarth's task was to secure supply lines to the 9th Army forces. They were in Praga, a suburb on the eastern shore of the Vistula. In addition, Himmler

Heinz Reinefarth in SS General's uniform.

HEINZ REINEFARTH

Lived: 1903-79

Nationality: German.

Rank: SS-Gruppenführer, it corresponds to a lieutenant general in the army.

Trivia: was elected Mayor of Westerland in West Germany after the war despite his background as a SS general.

relayed an order from Hitler to Reinefarth: Warsaw should be razed to the ground.

OVER THE COURSE

of several terrible days at the start of August, a civilian massacre unfolded that was unequalled in the history of warfare. Tens

of thousands of people were executed by German military forces. After the Home Army had been captured in early October 1944, Warsaw was emptied of



German soldiers move on to one of Warsaw's streets during battles with the Polish Home Army. August 1944.



SCHREMER/GALERIE BILDERWELT/GETTY

people and burned to the ground. When the city was captured by the Red Army in January 1945, only 1,000 survivors were left in the ruins. Hitler's order had been carried out to the letter.

Heinz Reinefarth's last mission during the war was to defend the Küstrin fortress. He refused to fight to the last man, but instead broke out of the siege and reached German lines with 600 men from the garrison.

ON 30TH MARCH, he was arrested and taken to the military prison in Torgau. He was sentenced to death by the dying Nazi regime, but the execution never took place.

During the trial in Nuremberg, Reinefarth was a witness, which may have helped him to escape closer scrutiny. He later

pursued his career in the new West Germany, and in 1951 was elected Mayor of Westerland on the island of Sylt.

POLAND TRIED TO get Reinefarth extradited to prosecute him for war crimes, but the West German government rejected the petition. Instead, it initiated a preliminary investigation against him by the German judiciary, but the case was dropped in 1967 due to a lack of evidence. One of the reasons why he was acquitted may be that it had been 20 years since the events. If he had been charged after the war, the outcome might have been different.

The German court dismissed the case both because it was not possible to prove that Reinefarth knew the levelling that had taken

place behind his lines, and because the forces that carried out the action had not reported directly to him. The unclear chain of command in which he directed only parts of Kaminski's and Dirlewanger's forces contributed to the court's decision to drop the case.

Heinz Reinefarth died aged 75 in 1979. Paradoxically, if the Nazi regime had carried out his death sentence, justice would have been done. The fact that Reinefarth was a graduate lawyer instead helped him to present his defence in such a way that the charges against him were laid aside. ★

Svante Sandblom



Victims of the massacre.

"A CIVILIAN MASSACRE UNFOLDED THAT WAS UNEQUALLED IN THE HISTORY OF WARFARE"

TEENAGE ARMY

On D-Day 16,000 Hitler Youth were put into battle against invasion forces. The boys had sworn that they would fight to the last man and were assigned to defend the city of Caen. Allied plans anticipated the city being taken on day one – the boys held out for 33.

Text: **ELSE CHRISTENSEN**

A very young German soldier from the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" in Normandy on 28th July, 1944. His hands rest on an MG 42 machine gun.

HELD CAEN

“Take cover!” The cry rang out across the field as the planes approached at low altitude.

It had begun: the Allies had arrived and fighting could begin. 17-year-old SS-Sturmmann Hellmuth Pock looked up at the planes just over his head. When he saw the German markings, he threw up his arms waving. The others followed shouting “bravo” and “heil”.

The pilots responded by tilting their wings. The power and determination inspired the young men

on the ground, who were all convinced that they would be able to repel the Allied invasion.

The mist lay like a thin grey carpet over the green hills of Normandy when Pock and his comrades drove out to the coast on the morning of 6th June, 1944. The 12th SS Panzer Division “Hitlerjugend”, which included officers and NCOs, consisted of ►

“THE 12TH SS PANZER DIVISION... WERE ABOUT TO FACE THEIR BAPTISM OF FIRE.”



ULLSTEIN/GETTY

Mechanised SS Infantry near Caen in July 1944, one month after the Allies' invasion of Normandy.

CHILD SOLDIERS AT THE FRONT

A delegation from the SS division *Großdeutschland* visits a military training camp. In the middle stands Colonel Horst Niemack talking to some recruits from the *Hitlerjugend* division.



GETTY IMAGES

► 20,540 men, 148 tanks and 333 other vehicles were now about to face their baptism of fire.

The soldiers were enthused at the thought of thundering over the fields and pushing the enemy back into the sea. They remained happily ignorant of what lay ahead and why their division had been created in the first place.



The division's emblem is a single S-rune and Hitler Youth's symbol is a key.

SINCE THE DEFEAT at Stalingrad the year before, the German army lacked men, and its fighting spirit had begun to wane. The military leadership expected an Allied invasion in France, but they could not divert troops from the hard-pressed Eastern Front. The solution, proposed by the SS and quickly approved by Hitler, was to create a completely new SS division of volunteer boys born in 1926 from the Hitler Youth: a small army of 17 year olds. Thanks to their ideological training in the Nazi youth organisation, Germany could expect a division of highly motivated young people ready to sacrifice themselves for their country – role models and cannon fodder rolled into one.

German troops poured in from all directions; whether in armoured troop transport, lorries or motorcycles, they all headed towards the coast at high speed. Not a single enemy plane was in sight.

The task of the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) division was primarily to defend the city of Caen, which lay 1.4 miles from the invasion beaches, and

which formed a strategically important hub with many major roads leading to the rest of France. It would not be that difficult a task because the German forces were completely superior to the Allies – or so the youngsters had heard.

Suddenly Pock was struck by a thought: the fighting might already be over before they arrived. Imagine if everything was already over! He could hardly bear the thought.

At a junction, Pock's unit broke past one of the other columns in the division. Eyes wide, Pock



BUNDESARCHIV

Grenadiers from the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" line up after being awarded the Iron Cross in July 1944.

“GERMAN TROOPS POURED IN FROM ALL DIRECTIONS”

followed the camouflaged vehicles that passed in front of him like rolling bushes. Under the steel helmets, the young faces shone with expectation and confidence. “Good luck, Comrades!” cried Pock and waved as the last vehicles drove past. When his own vehicle was moving again, it was almost as if he could feel the victory that was waiting somewhere in front of him – beyond the next horizon filled with wafting pale yellow corn.

AT NOON THEY met a completely different kind of column. Pock and his comrades surveyed the scattered scrap at the roadside in disbelief while trying to figure out what kind of vehicles the huge steel skeletons had once belonged to. Shells and spent bullets lay scattered on the ground between the bodies of German soldiers who had been blown to pieces beyond recognition. Allied fighter bombers had turned up with devastating power.

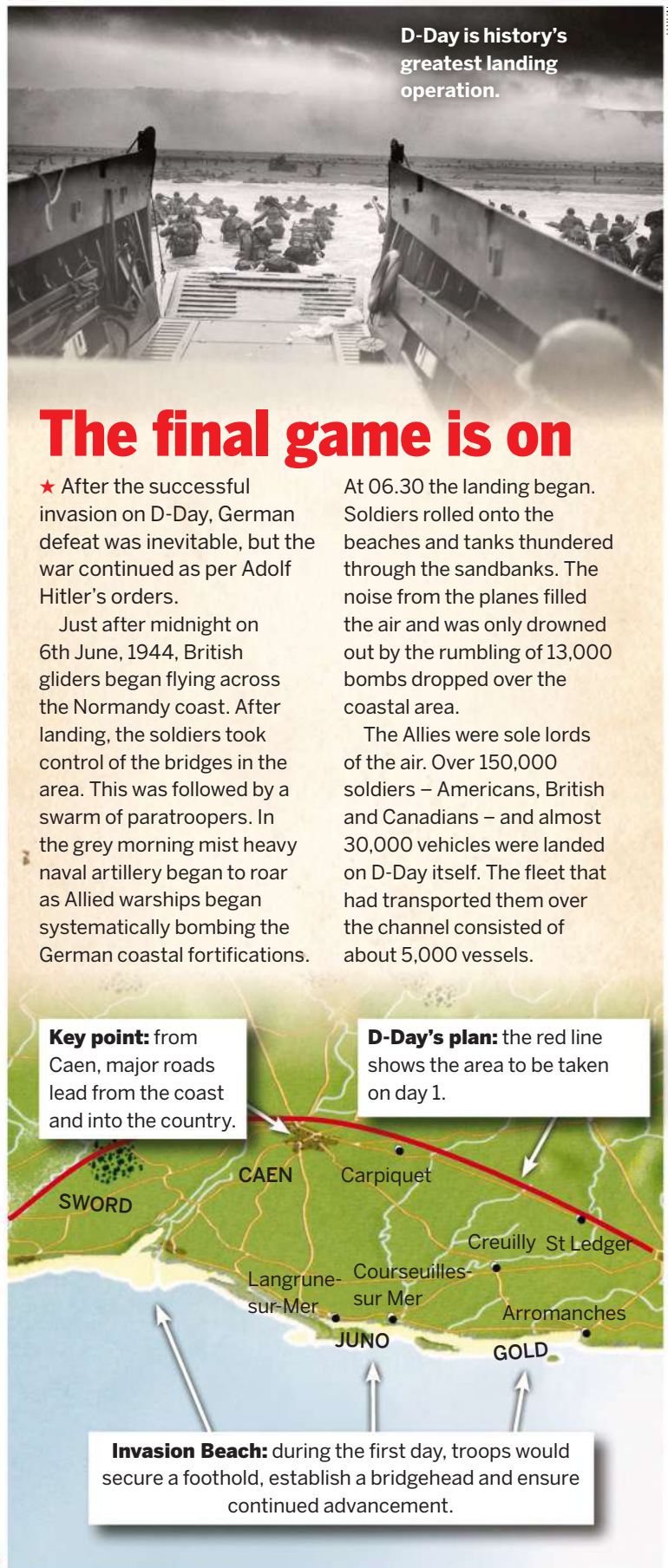
The tailgate was open on one of the armoured cars, and Pock saw the legs and lower body of a soldier sticking out. Pock could see that his entire upper body had been burned to nothing. As the horrific sight struck him, Pock hoped that the soldier had been killed by a bullet before the flames had engulfed him.

A little further along, he heard the sound of planes and in the next second a whole swarm flew over them. The enemy! Pock and his comrades opened fire with their weapons. Nothing happened. Pock was surprised how the aircraft just carried on. There wasn't a single smoky streak in the sky that could give hope that their bullets had made any impact.

“These damned dogs don't notice anything at all”, exclaimed one of the soldiers reportedly when the planes vanished over the horizon.

At 19 years old Alois Morawetz was the youngest Panther commander in the 3rd Company. For two days, his tanks had stealthily crossed the landscape to avoid being seen by enemy aircraft. Since the invasion three days earlier, the Allies had moved quickly and occupied several small towns west of Caen. Contrary to what the youths had first thought, the Luftwaffe was in a pitiful state and had failed to provide support for troops on the ground. Nevertheless, Morawetz seemed to be lucky: even though his unit had been shot at, no one was injured.

Now he was driving to Norrey, one of the small towns that the division would recapture from the Allies. As the column of tanks approached the



CHILD SOLDIERS AT THE FRONT



Hitlerjugend division attempts more attacks against the Allies but resistance is too strong.

► town, Morawetz stayed close to a railway line. In his headphones he heard his company's code word: "Watesaal" (waiting room) followed by the order, "Swing to the left." Morawetz confirmed, relaying the order by radio to his tanks and swinging away from the railway line. From the tank's turret he looked over fields and meadows. The sun was high in the sky and everything looked strangely peaceful. Morawetz crept into his combat position in the turret and closed the hatch.

THE EXPLOSION WAS huge. The entire tank shook as it had been hit by a giant sledgehammer and then stood still. Fortunately, Morawetz realised that the tank was on fire. He heard a crackling sound. The fire had taken hold in the machine gun ammunition. He tried to push up the turret's hatch, but it was stuck. In the semi-darkness he shouted at the gunner and the driver, but there was clearly no one else alive in the burning tank.

Morawetz pushed his hands against the hatch, but it was impossible to move the massive steel

lid. Under him the flames began to lick against the turret. Desperately he fought with the hatch, which suddenly yielded and opened. Light poured in, followed by a loud noise from exploding shells – hostile artillery being fired at them. Morawetz jumped from the tank and ran a few metres. He fell and then everything went black.

When he came to, he was surrounded by burning German tanks. He managed to get up and stagger on unsteady feet to a medic standing by a motorcycle with sidecar a hundred metres away. Morawetz looked around. Soldiers with scorched uniforms and burned faces approached from all sides. Bullets whizzed past the ears of the wounded.

The medic waved Morawetz into the sidecar, and then drove off at a furious speed. Morawetz's luck had held.

The hopeless counterattack that Morawetz's unit had participated in had cost the Germans dearly. They did everything possible to protect the remaining tanks.

In the middle of the night, Hellmuth Pock was sent out to repair a tank whose steering had been damaged. The air inside the tank was still warm following the long hot day. In the dark he reached out for something to hold and became confused when his hands gripped a sticky substance.

"Our commander was killed in action. His head was ripped off... The whole interior is a mess", said the tank's gunner apologetically.

"It's alright. There's nothing you can do", replied Pock. He didn't know what else to say. Quietly, he tried to wipe his hands on the inside of the Panzer. Outside shells were still flying around close by.

AFTER FIVE DAYS of fighting, the Germans were forced back. The Allies were far too superior. The defence line in front of Caen still held, but the troops were exhausted. Because of the Allies' supremacy in the air, armoured reinforcements had trouble getting forward.

North of the Seine lay the 15th Army with fresh infantry divisions, but Hitler refused to put them into battle. The dictator was convinced that D-Day was simply a diversion for another larger invasion, and he would not waste resources on the forces needed in Caen. The 15th Army had to be saved for the real attack.

The Führer's decision sealed the fate of the Hitlerjugend division. The soldiers dug themselves in and prepared to defend Caen to the last man. Shallow trenches were replaced with fortified positions reinforced by railroad sleepers. Despite almost uninterrupted Allied attacks, the young troops fought to hold their positions.

The German field hospitals were soon full of the wounded and dying. Friedrich Zistler, a medical

“I CAN’T DO ANY MORE. THE LOSSES ARE TOO HIGH. IT’S A BLOODY MESS.”

officer in the Panzer-Pionier-Bataillon had been injured and lay next to a Hitler Youth soldier. The young man had been given morphine and was barely conscious, but occasionally he would groan in pain and mumble something incomprehensible. The doctor was also anaesthetised with morphine, but suddenly he heard the soldier say loud and clear:

“Mother, mother, but I mean Germany.”

Before the doctor slipped back into a morphine fog, he wondered what the young soldier meant. When he woke up again, the boy was dead.

SS-Untersturmführer Karl-Heinz Gauch started his motorcycle and drove out into the countryside. Along the way, telephone lines had collapsed between bomb craters and shell holes. In the meadows, dead cows lay everywhere, bloated and stinking in the sunshine. He drove through a town that was almost completely deserted. The few people he saw crept around like ghosts trying to hide from the living.

IT WAS 25TH June and Caen remained in German hands. But around it, one town after another fell to the Allies, and the German defences began to waver. Gauch had been sent to look for a battalion that staff had not been able to contact. It should be at the front about a mile outside Caen. Gauch had marked the command post’s position on a detailed map.

When Gauch was almost there, he was suddenly fired upon. He braked, abandoned the motorcycle and ran on as he sought cover wherever possible.

The command post was an earth bunker with a deep hole at the entrance. When Gauch threw himself inside with a thud, the air pressure snuffed



out the only lit candle in the post. Someone swore quietly in the dark, a match was lit and soon light shone again. Breathless, but eager, Gauch called out his name and rank: “I request your present situation. Why is there no contact with the Division?” He could barely breathe. He caught his breath as he looked at the officers around him.

The men were unshaven and dirty and in the dark their eyes were sunk deep in their sockets. The duty officer, a pale man with coal-black hair, took both of Gauch’s hands and looked earnestly at him.

“The situation? Tell Gerd he must help us under all circumstances. Tell him we are in very bad shape. I can barely hold on. I had to withdraw the left wing to here an hour ago.” ▶

Ammunition bearers from the 12th SS Panzer Division “Hitlerjugend” in mid-June 1944.

The Panzer Division was declared combat-ready on 1st June, 1944. It included 148 tanks.



The youth elite troops



★ After the defence of Caen, the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" was used as an elite force and inserted where the fighting was hardest.

The defeat in Caen did not mean that the war was over for young soldiers. Army High Command considered the division to be an elite body that could be put into particularly difficult situations. This happened just after the battle of Caen.

The division made a particularly remarkable contribution to the so-called Falaise Pocket, where

large German forces were close to being surrounded. The division opened a corridor in the pocket allowing thousands of German soldiers to escape before the Allies closed the gap and began a devastating bombardment with artillery and bombers.

But hundreds of soldiers from the Hitlerjugend division were caught at Falaise. When the battle of Normandy ended in August, it had lost 8,000 men.

It later participated in the failed Ardennes Offensive, and in the hopeless attempt to liberate

Hungary's capital, Budapest, from the Russians. Then, like the other German troops on the Eastern Front, the division was forced to retreat from the Red Army forces.

On 8th May, 1945, the day the war ended in Europe, the last soldiers in the division ran as fast as they could westward and surrendered to US troops. Hitlerjugend division's commander Kurt Meyer was sentenced to ten years in prison after being convicted for serious war crimes.

Armband used by soldiers in the division.



Two soldiers from the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" at a castle outside Caen. The division fought all the way through to Germany's final surrender on 8th May, 1945.



Child soldiers from the Hitlerjugend division take care of a colleague who is injured in the fighting in Normandy. The picture was taken on 18th August, 1944.

- The officer brought out a map and showed where the cave lay in the German lines.

"I can't do any more. The losses are too high. It's a bloody mess."

He sounded hurried and breathless. Occasionally the candle fluttered after an explosion. The reports started to conflict: "Shortage of ammunition", "Chief wounded", "One Panzer knocked out".

One of the calls prompted the black-haired officer to reach for the field phone.

"Hold positions, hold them under all circumstances!" He roared into the telephone. His voice broke. Gauch had seen enough and stood up to go.

"Don't forget anything, Gauch. Don't forget us", was the officer's plea.

THE NEXT DAY the battalion was forced back from its position. The Allies knew that Hitler had finally agreed to send reinforcements to the area and that a few powerful armoured divisions were on their way. Therefore, they put every effort into taking Caen before reinforcements arrived. What Gauch had witnessed was just the result of the preliminary manoeuvres before a major Allied offensive.

Hundreds of Sherman tanks rolled slowly forward. The Allied offensive codenamed Epsom was in full swing, and the tanks destroyed everything that crossed their path. When the Allies reached the

"GIVE MY LOVE TO MY WIFE... AND THE LITTLE ONE... TAKE CARE OF THEM. AND DO NOT BE SAD. THERE IS NOTHING SAD..."

town of Saint-Manvieu, the Germans knew the situation was critical. If the tanks were to pass through the town park where the Germans had their command post, they would be able to capture an intact bridge and roll straight out on the road to Caen. It would have been a disaster.

In the park the Germans collected everything ounce of strength they could muster. Even non-combatants – messengers, clerks and orderlies – took up position among the trees when the first Sherman tank rolled toward the entrance to the park – and halted.

"That tank has to go!" the commander pointed towards a flamethrower tank.

EMIL DÜRR, a 24-year-old *unterscharführer* (junior squad commander) in the Hitlerjugend division, heard the order but did not send his men. He took responsibility himself. Suddenly, he ran with a Panzerfaust and headed for the tank. He fired the weapon, but the tank's armour held firm.

At the same moment, Dürr was hit in the chest by a bullet from a machine gun. He ignored the pain ►



WAFFEN SS

Emil Dürr died from his injuries after he had knocked out a tank.

CHILD SOLDIERS AT THE FRONT

ULSTEIN/GETTY



Some young grenadiers from the 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" are rewarded with the Iron Cross after their efforts at Caen.

► and ran back to get a new Panzerfaust. This time he took aim at the tracks. They were destroyed by the explosion. The tank was stopped, but it was not disarmed. Then came another round of volleys and Dürr's legs were swept from under him. Despite this, he crawled back to the trenches where he found a magnetic mine and took it with him.

"You are bleeding," someone called to him, but Dürr did not care. He stumbled against the tank as bullets whizzed around his ears. He reached the tank and fastened the mine to the hood. Then he wandered back. The mine exploded with a loud bang, and the tank disappeared completely. It was disarmed. With his last strength, Dürr dragged himself to his post where a couple of soldiers grabbed him and helped him to lie down. Blood gushed from both his chest and legs, but he was conscious and lucid. He asked for a cigarette and something to rest his head against. He got a gas mask, the only one that worked. Quietly, he smoked his cigarette as he grasped a tuft of grass with his other hand.

"You must not let them get into the park", he said to the boys. "Give my love to my wife... and the little

one... Take care of them. And do not be sad. There is nothing sad." The cigarette fell out of his hand before his chest rose and fell one last time. Now the others were left to take care of the remaining tanks.

German reinforcements came on 28th June, but then it was already too late. The carnage moved inexorably closer to Caen.

ON THE EVENING of 7th July, Leo Freund and his comrades had sought refuge in a tunnel in a quarry just outside the city. There was the dull thud of Allied bombs, and the roof over them shook disturbingly. As Freund weighted up the pros and cons of leaving the tunnel, a bomb dropped outside.

It triggered a landslide that blocked the entrance. They were buried alive in an impenetrable, stifling darkness. One of the men started screaming, but another took command and managed to soothe frayed nerves. He explained calmly and sensibly to the other soldiers that they would have to take turns digging. Those who weren't working had to remain quiet to save the oxygen as best they could.

Freund lay quietly on the cold rocks. All perception of time and space had been lost in the

dark. He was convinced that none of them would survive. Then suddenly he heard a cry: "Light!"

Blessed fresh air poured in through the opening. While the soldiers took deep breaths, they heard someone high above shouting their names. Helping hands pulled them up one by one. Freund knew his emotions were running high. He laughed and cried while embracing his comrades.

For a month, the Allies vainly attempted to take Caen. For the sake of the civilian population, high command had refrained from bombing the city, but on 7th July, their patience ran out and the Allies took off the silk gloves. 467 heavy bombers dropped 2,500 tonnes of bombs over Caen. 3,000 French civilians and a smaller – but unknown number – of Germans were killed. On 8th July, Allied ground forces attacked the city again.

The next day, Hitlerjugend division's commander, SS-Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer, pulled his last troops away from the centre. In a fortified position in one of Caen's suburbs, he found some of his soldiers – they were fast asleep.

The faces under the dirty steel helmets looked wiped out. They appeared older and more ravaged than they should in view of the boys' ages. The soldiers were so tired that he had to shake each one to rouse them. For several weeks they had fought without rest and were totally exhausted. But they followed orders. Groggily, they got to their feet and started walking. Faltering and sleepily they passed through Caen's ruins and left the city.

The quarry where Leo Freund found himself was one of Hitlerjugend division's rear positions. The unit's mission was to cover the retreat. Everyone knew that Allied soldiers could come at any time and the atmosphere was tense.

ONE OF THE group officers – Richter – called Freund and announced his belief he was going to die that day. He asked Freund to make sure his personal belongings were sent to his family. Freund waved him away and said he would ask Richter to do the same if he himself was killed. They separated with a cheerful comment that they would see who was hit first.

When artillery shells began to fall around them, Freund ran to his own position and told his comrades about Richter's gloomy prediction. Before he had finished telling the story, a soldier came running over and threw himself down on the ground. He said that Richter had been killed. Freund climbed up from the trench, ran back to the place where he had just talked with Richter and found him dead.

Freund had only one thought in his mind: he had to give Richter a proper funeral. A couple of comrades helped him carry the body further into the quarry while hearing the cries: "The enemy is coming! The

"EVERY SECOND THEY WAITED TO HEAR GUNFIRE AND FEEL THE BULLETS BORE INTO THEIR FLESH"

enemy is coming!" The boys exchanged glances and then began to dig into the hard, rocky ground. They had laid down both helmets and weapons so they could dig, and they were preoccupied. Suddenly Freund stiffened. Something was wrong. He turned and saw several rifle barrels pointing toward him and his two colleagues. A group of Brits stood around 20 yards from them, motionless and tense, ready to shoot.

TOGETHER, FREUND AND the others continued to bury their dead comrade. Every second they waited to hear gunfire and feel the bullets bore into their flesh. They would also die today – of that they were absolutely sure.

The work took time, but eventually they could place Richter's body in the shallow grave. On the grave they made a small mound and then tied together two twigs into a cross, which they stuck between the rocks. They folded their hands and prayed together. Then they looked up. They had done what they were supposed to do. Now it came.

The Brits were still ready to shoot, but they did not. They could have killed the boys a long time ago, but they were clearly touched by the scene they witnessed.

Very slowly, Freund bent down to pick up his helmet and gun. Then he went with the two other boys towards the edge of the quarry without daring to look back at the British soldiers. Once they had left, the three boys ran as fast as they could. Beyond lay the road – the same road as the remaining 12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend" had just taken.

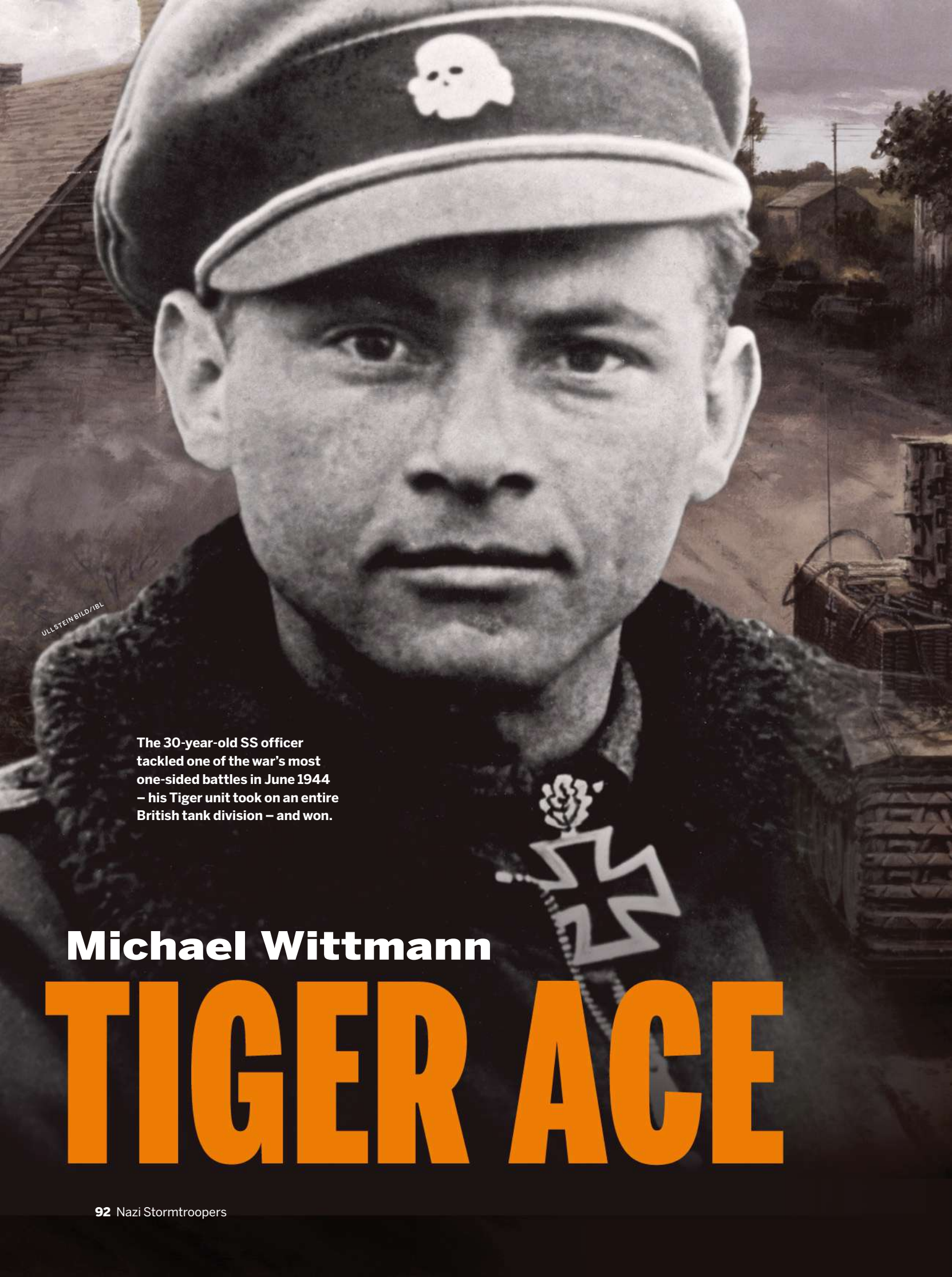
Leo Freund survived the war as did Hellmuth Pock, Karl-Heinz Gauch and Alois Morawetz. They sent their stories to one of their former officers, Hubert Meyer, who collated them in a book about the SS (See Further Reading box). 🇩🇪

Else Christensen is a military historian.



Propaganda Poster, illustrating the heroic dream of youth who had never experienced anything but Nazism.

Further reading: *Blood and Honor: The History of the 12th SS Panzer Division, "Hitler Youth", 1943-1945* (1987) by Craig W H. Luther ★ *The 12th SS. The History of the Hitler Youth Panzer Division: Volume One* (2005) by Hubert Meyer



ULLSTEIN BILD / IBL

The 30-year-old SS officer tackled one of the war's most one-sided battles in June 1944 – his Tiger unit took on an entire British tank division – and won.

Michael Wittmann

TIGER ACE



Wittmann preferred to keep the hatch open for a better overview.

80-mm side armour provided such good protection that most guns could only penetrate it from close range.

Machine guns were often used to strafe the terrain in front where the enemy might be lying in ambush.

The 88-mm gun could break through the armour of any enemy tank.

100-mm front armour made it almost invulnerable to frontal attacks.

72.5-cm caterpillars spread the weight evenly so the Tiger didn't sink in soft ground.

The Normandy landings in 1944 marked the beginning of the end for the Germans on the Western Front. But at Villers-Bocage, panzer commander Michael Wittmann managed to take the British by surprise and demonstrate it wouldn't be plain sailing for the Allies.

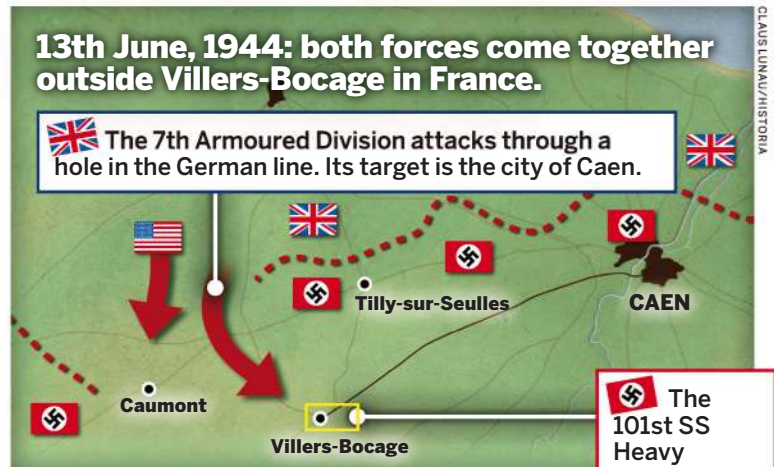
PANZER ACE WITTMANN

Spanzer commander Michael Wittmann pored over the map in front of him. On a June day in 1944 he was attempting to get an overview of the situation at the front in northern France, when one of his men suddenly rushed through the door.

"Obersturmführer, tanks are driving past outside", the SS soldier said excitedly. "They're a peculiar round shape and I don't think they're German."

Any hope of a quiet morning was shattered. Wittmann ran through the bushes to peer on to the N175 highway. Hidden in the bushes he watched as an endless array of armoured vehicles rolled past. They were British.

The officer turned on his heels and ran back to his own tanks that were camouflaged in a sunken lane. Normally Wittmann would have been able to call on 14 powerful Tiger tanks, but he only had four left. The rest had been abandoned on the long road from Paris due to engine problems or gearbox failure. What was left of Wittmann's unit was minuscule compared to the British. They were rested and



The 101st SS Heavy Panzer Battalion is the only German reserve force in place at Villers-Bocage.

repaired, but despite being hopelessly outnumbered they couldn't let the British continue unhindered along the main road and past German lines.

The tank commander barked out several orders and his experienced soldiers responded immediately. One after another, the Tigers' engines roared into

1 British advanced unawares

On 13th June, 1944 an entire British armoured division rolled through Villers-Bocage in Normandy. At the same time four German Tiger tanks were recuperating nearby. SS panzer commander Michael Wittmann decided to take on the entire enemy alone.

The British column consisted of more than 20 vehicles



Sherman Firefly

76.2-mm gun
Firefly was the only British tank that could beat the German Tiger in a frontal assault. It was a US Sherman fitted with a powerful 17-pounder anti-tank gun.

Cromwell

75-mm gun
The British Cromwell tank was fast, with a maximum speed of just over 60 km/h. But its weak armour and inadequate gun meant it required support from Fireflies.

Stuart

37-mm gun
The US M3 Stuart light tank was unsuited for tank-to-tank battle. It was primarily used for scouting.

Sherman RA

No armament
Artillery observers needed space for maps. The gun was removed, and a painted wooden rod was attached in its place to deceive the enemy.

M5 Half-track

12.7-mm machine gun
The US half-track vehicle could carry nine British soldiers. Its armour was only 8 mm thick and couldn't offer sufficient protection against guns.

Humber Scout Car

No armament
The small British car was used as a fast means of transport by senior officers and recon units.

6-pounder

57-mm gun
It was small and easily to transport, so the British continued to use the gun even though larger and more powerful weapons were available.

Loyd Carrier

No armament
The small tracked vehicle transported 6-pounder anti-tank guns and their ammunition.



Inside the town a Firefly lay in wait. Several tanks were on their way.



A reconnaissance squad, artillery observers and regiment command stood at the town limits. They possessed three Stuarts, five Cromwells and a Sherman RA.

94 Nazi Stormtroopers

Villers-Bocage

life. Wittmann's own tank had failed to complete the journey from Paris, so he took command of another. It rolled 20 metres, then the engine died. Wittmann climbed out, then ran cursing to another Tiger with number 222 on its back and climbed onboard. Its own commander was ordered to leave. Within seconds the tank was ready to attack with Wittmann commanding from its turret.

WHEN THE GERMANS struck, all traffic on the N175 had stopped. The British vanguard was investigating the terrain further ahead, and behind it a long line of tanks and armoured vehicles sat waiting.

Like the Germans, the British had also enjoyed a relatively leisurely morning. It was 13th June, 1944, one week after D-Day, and now a tank division had moved through a hole in the German defence lines. Their idyll was broken when Wittmann fired off his first shot and destroyed a British Cromwell tank that hadn't even seen the threat coming from behind.

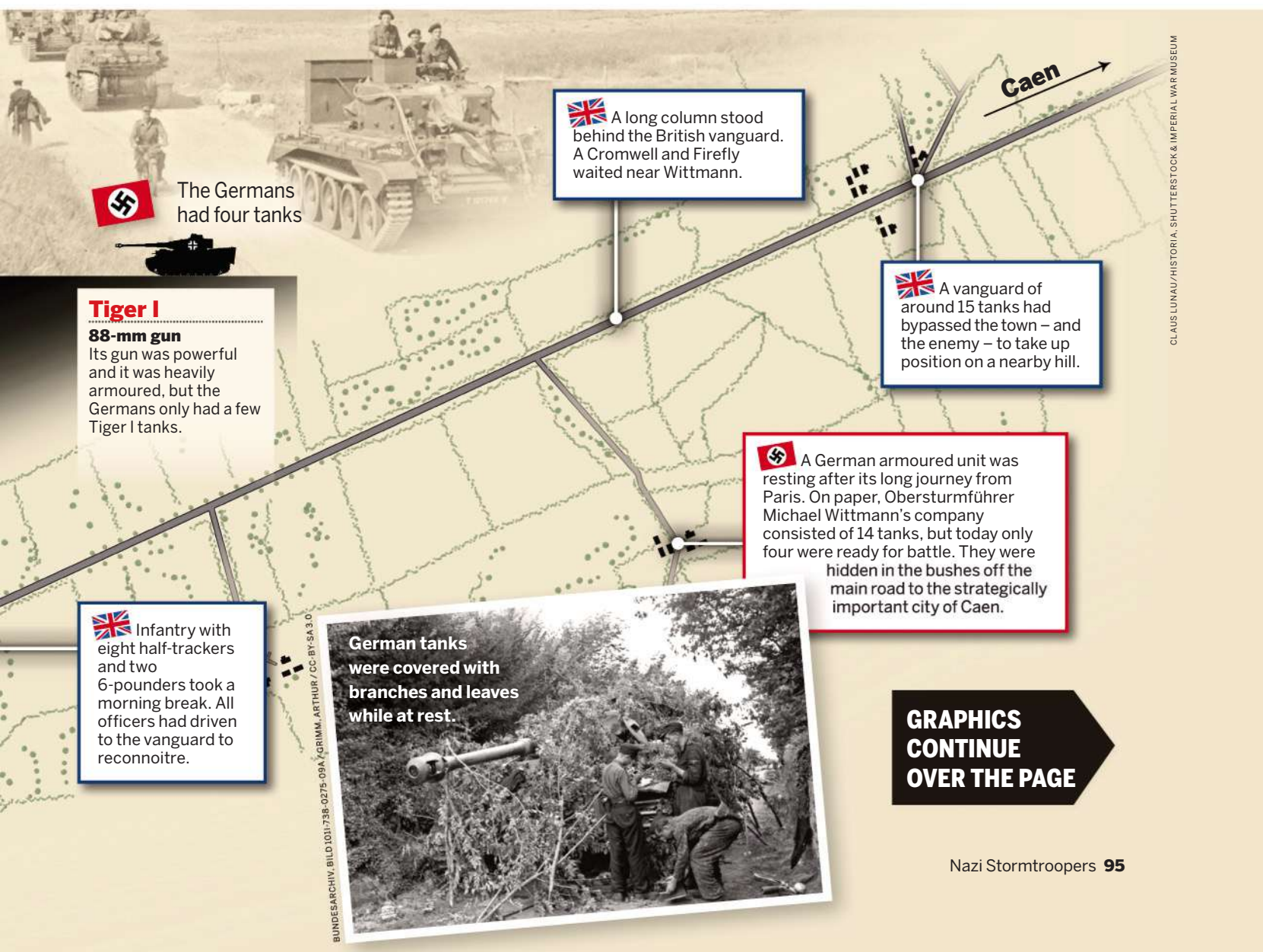
"[I] surprised the English as much as they had me", said Wittmann after the battle. He took the tank on

"[I] SURPRISED THE ENGLISH AS MUCH AS THEY HAD ME"

to the road and directed his gunner towards the next target: a British Sherman Firefly, barely a hundred metres further away that was now moving its long barrel slowly towards the unexpected danger. A single shot from Tiger 222 ended its advance.

Wittmann now had a difficult choice to make. To the right, on the road to Caen, was the British vanguard containing all the tanks he'd previously seen rolling past. In the opposite direction lay a large, but unknown number of enemy vehicles – he didn't know how many or how well-equipped they were. His instincts and five years of experience in the German panzer divisions determined his choice.

"I had no time to assemble my company", said Wittmann after the battle. "I set off with one tank and passed the order to the others not to retreat a single step but to hold their ground." While the other remaining Tigers would block the vanguard, ►



Two elite forces went straight at each other

The battle in Villers-Bocage was fought between two powerful units – both with a proud reputation and notable victories behind them.



Montgomery's Desert Rats

★ Expectations among the British

7th Armoured Division were sky high when the force landed on the French coast. The “Desert Rats”, named after their emblem, had been acclaimed and were famous for their battles against Rommel’s Afrika Korps. General Montgomery had demanded the elite force accompany him as he left North Africa to take part in D-Day.

But the experienced armoured troops’ efforts were disappointing. The division moved forward slowly in attack, officers made basic errors and morale among the main fighting forces was low. Some historians believe the war veterans were exhausted after four years of fighting and that they had lost the will to battle hard for victory.



Hitler's armoured bodyguards

★ The Leibstandarte SS

Adolf Hitler was created as the Führer’s personal bodyguard, but became a well-equipped panzer division in the Nazi Waffen-SS in 1944.

Its most powerful unit was the 101st SS Heavy Panzer Battalion that possessed Tiger I tanks.

Leibstandarte’s impressive efforts on the battlefield were offset by its participation in numerous massacres of both civilians and Allied POWs.

German Tiger tanks were grouped in special armoured battalions.

▶ Wittmann launched himself into a race to almost certain death down the highway. Without realising it, he and his men had decided to take the fight to an entire armoured division. One of World War II’s boldest actions had begun.

Wittmann’s solo attack started when he came within range of eight parked British armoured troop carriers. Alongside them were those soldiers who’d taken the opportunity to stretch their legs during a break in the advance. Some were drinking tea.

THE AROMA OF tea had just permeated the air when Wittmann’s huge Tiger thundered towards them. The morning peace was replaced by panic as the German tank opened fire.

“They were so surprised that they took to flight, but not with their vehicles”, explained Wittmann. “Instead they jumped out, and I shot up the battalion’s vehicles as I drove by.”

The tank saved its precious supply of shells by using its machine guns to take care of the poorly armoured M5 troop carriers. At the same time, the Tiger continued down the road. Wittmann trusted its thick front armoured plating and made no attempt to protect the tank from enemy fire.

The parked British vehicles had been reduced to burning wrecks when Wittmann caught sight of his next target: three light M3 Stuart tanks. Their 37-mm guns bounced harmlessly off his Tiger.

The foremost Stuart began to swing out into the middle of the road – perhaps a desperate ploy to hold Wittmann up by standing as a roadblock. But an 88-mm shell from the Tiger’s gun smashed through the Stuart’s armour and killed half its four-man crew. The explosion sounded a warning to the British further back that something was happening.

Behind the three Stuart tanks, on the outskirts of Villers-Bocage, were the armoured regiment’s command tanks who directed the British advance. The regimental commander himself wasn’t there – he’d felt something was amiss and had driven to ▶

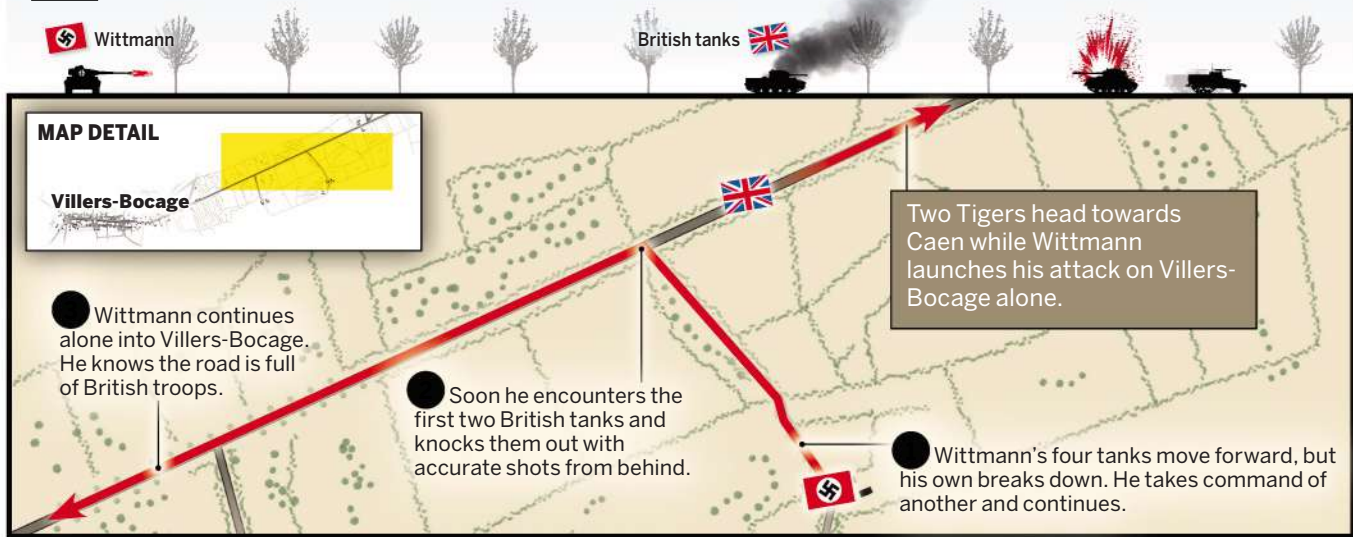


NICOLAS TRUGGIAN

2 Foolhardy attack begins

Wittmann's Tiger rolls out on the road to Caen where he surprises the British column.

Caen →

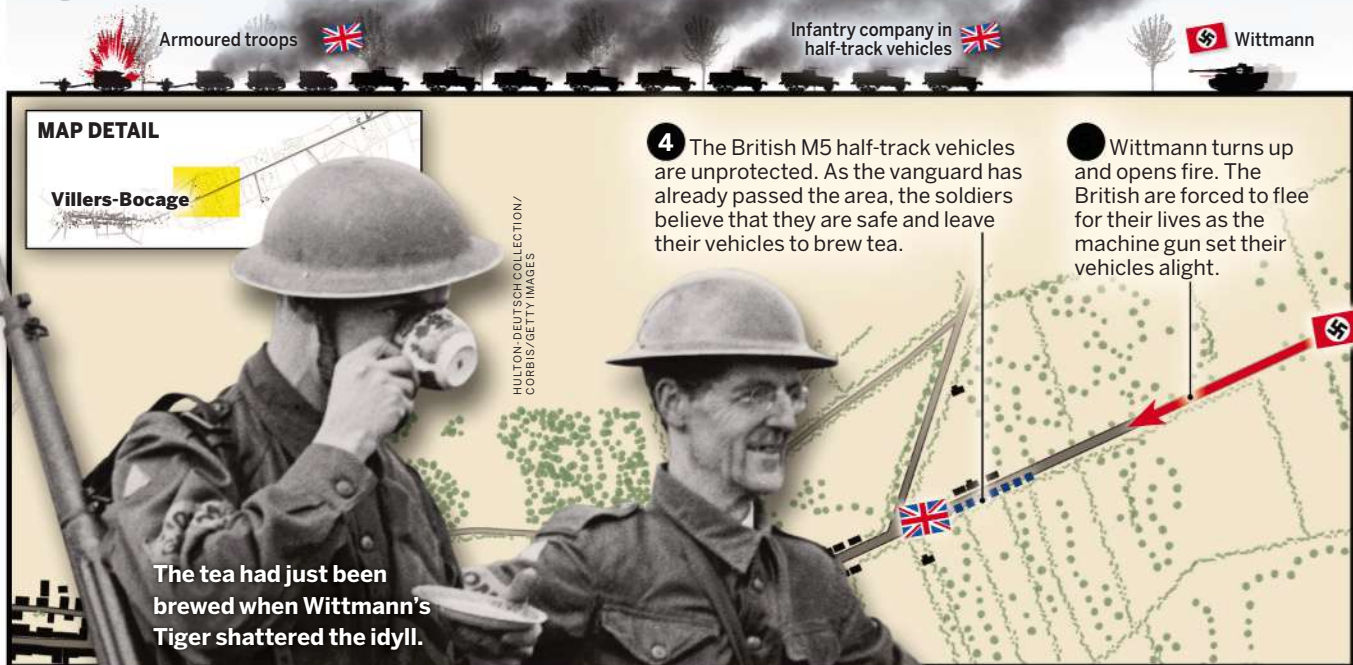


CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIA & SHUTTERSTOCK

3 Brits' tea break is interrupted

SS officer surprises British soldiers who are enjoying a quiet morning.

← Villers-Bocage



HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION / CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

4 Light tanks sacrifice themselves

Three British tanks attempt to block the way of Wittmann's armoured monster.

← Villers-Bocage



**GRAPHICS
CONTINUE
OVER THE PAGE**

PANZER ACE WITTMANN

5 The British panic

Armoured regimental staff try to flee from the superior enemy.

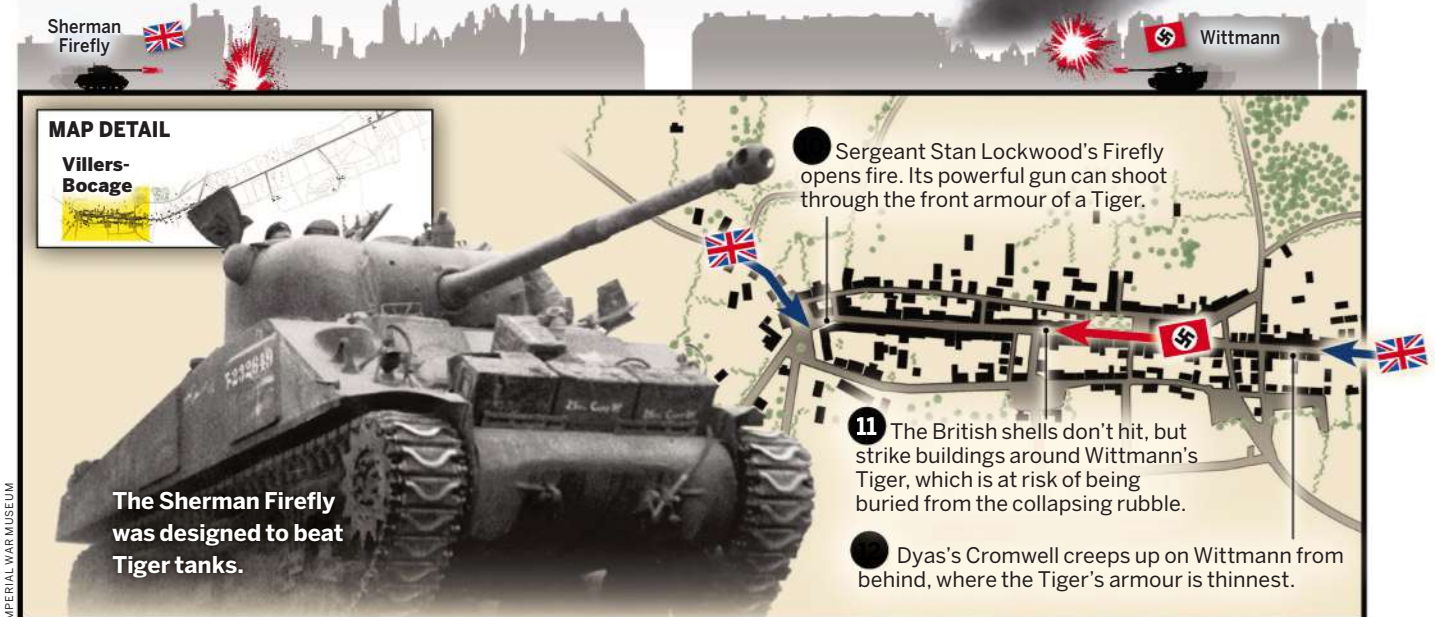
Caen →



6 Shootout in Villers-Bocage

Wittmann meets a worthy opponent when he's confronted by a Sherman Firefly.

Caen →



7 Wittmann's solo performance ends

The tank turns around and drives back towards his unit before a shell ends its journey.

Caen →



“EVEN FROM THIS SHORT DISTANCE ITS SHELL EXPLODED HARMLESSLY ON THE THICK PLATING”

► the vanguard by tank. The other staff tanks had remained in the column.

Lieutenant John Cloudsley-Thompson, who commanded one of the Cromwell tanks, saw the flames when the little Stuart exploded further ahead. He watched his commander start to reverse and ordered his tank's driver to do the same. Behind them, the road made a turn – if they could get around it, they'd be outside the range of the unknown enemy that lay somewhere in front of them.

THE RECENTLY INTRODUCED Cromwell tank was designed to drive fast – but only if it was going forward. In reverse its top speed was just three kilometres per hour. “Suddenly an armour-piercing shell whizzed between my radio operator's head and me”, Cloudsley-Thompson recounted later. He decided to get off the road and ordered the driver to turn and reverse through a hedge between two houses. Captain Pat Dyas's Cromwell followed suit.

At that moment, shells began to fall over those tanks still trying to reverse around the bend in the road. Then Cloudsley-Thompson got his first sight of the enemy who'd created the chaos: “Through the smoke I could make out the shape of a huge Tiger and I was not more than 25 yards away.”

His Cromwell's gun thundered off a shot, but even from this short distance its shell exploded harmlessly on the enemy's thick frontal plating. The 23-year-old lieutenant held his breath as the Tiger's 88-mm gun was slowly trained on him.

“Boom! We were hit!” Cloudsley-Thompson said, feeling a burning sensation as the shell passed between his legs before smashing into the engine.

His mouth was full of sand and burned paint. “Get out!” he managed to cry and jumped out of the tank, followed by his entire crew – all had escaped without injury.

“Undamaged, the Tiger drove on; its commander waved his cap and laughed,” Cloudsley-Thompson recalled later.

THE SS COMMANDER failed to spot Dyas's Cromwell, which sat in the garden next door. As the Tiger passed, the British tank had a clear shot at the German's thinner side plating. But Dyas couldn't take advantage of this unique opportunity: his gunner had disappeared. Just before the battle had begun, he'd gone out to relieve himself and ►



BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 101-299-1802-07 / SCHECK / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Michael Wittmann was often seen in German newspapers.

Panzer ace was propaganda tool

★ Michael Wittmann was one of Nazi Germany's most successful tank commanders and was followed by the Nazi propaganda machine. Wittmann was in the Waffen-SS when Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939. He took command of his first Tiger tank in 1943 and started to accumulate “kills” at furious speed.

Some sources have claimed he took out 30 Soviet tanks in

just five days during the Battle of Kursk in 1943. The following year, Wittmann fought against the British in Normandy and his triumph at Villers-Bocage was hailed in the German media. Hitler recalled him to Berlin to personally award him a medal for victory. But back in France, a British shell finally accounted for Wittmann and his entire Tiger crew on 8th August, 1944.

The Germans counted Wittmann's victories

138 enemy tanks

132 anti-tank guns

★ Despite his many kills, Wittmann ranked number four in the German rankings: Kurt Knispel topped with 168 tanks.

“WITTMANN’S RAID CAME TO A SUDDEN END WHEN A SHELL HIT THE TIGER’S BELT ASSEMBLY”

► failed to return. The Tiger continued into the town of Villers-Bocage.

Only two of the regimental staff tanks had managed to get around the bend in the road out of the German’s firing line. From there they fervently tried to get off the main street before the Tiger arrived.

In front of them lay two Observation Post (OP) tanks – one an unarmed Sherman without a main gun. The Germans nicknamed Shermans “Tommycookers” because they were so easy to set alight. The tank lived up to its nickname when Tiger 222 came around the bend and fired a shell directly into its turret. Behind it, an OP Cromwell had reversed down a side street and attempted to turn 180 degrees to flee, but a rock got caught between the wheel and one of the caterpillars.

FROM HIS PLACE in the turret, the tank commander watched helplessly as the Tiger passed on the main street, stopped, backed up and turned its barrel towards him. Instead of fighting a hopeless battle, he ordered the crew to abandon the stranded Cromwell. The commander stumbled as he threw himself headlong through a shop window. A second later, the Germans fired their gun.

Wittmann had now taken his morning’s tally to ten British tanks destroyed along with several armoured vehicles.

His gunner was swinging the tank barrel back on to the main street when a shell slammed into the wall of the house next door. The next shot was a direct hit, but flicked away off the Tiger 222’s front plating.

This opponent was a Sherman Firefly. It had a more powerful gun than even the Tiger’s 88-mm cannon. The German tank returned fire, but missed. The duelling vehicles were separated by just over 400 metres, and visibility was worsened by the dust that rose as shells smashed into the walls of surrounding buildings. After a few more attempts, neither gunmen could clearly make out their targets.

Wittmann decided that the time had come to return to his unit. The British appeared to have recovered after the initial shock of his attack. He reversed the Tiger and then turned to drive back out of Villers-Bocage. It ruined Captain Dyas’s chances of a sneak attack from the rear.

Dyas’s Cromwell had come through the attack on the regimental staff unscathed, and once Wittmann had passed his hideaway he pressed the reserve driver into service as gunner and restarted the hunt.



One of the many Cromwell tanks that Wittmann took out in the small French town of Villers-Bocage.

He met the Tiger coming back the other way, and Dyas’s Cromwell quickly became Tiger 222’s final prey of the day.

WITTMANN’S RAID CAME to a sudden end when a shell hit the Tiger’s belt assembly. It was unclear where the shot originated, but the Tiger was knocked out and Wittmann ordered his crew of four to abandon the vehicle. The men set course towards German lines.

“Made my way to a division, about 15 kilometres. Had to dodge enemy tanks several times”, Wittmann reported that evening. The British offensive ended



in failure, and they were forced to withdraw from Villers-Bocage. A few days later, Wittmann was able to recover Tiger 222 and leave the story of his remarkable battle to the newspapers and German propaganda machine. 🇩🇪

Esben Mønster-Kjær is a military historian.

Further reading: Villers-Bocage – Through the Lens, *After the Battle* (1999) by Daniel Taylor
★ *Michael Wittmann and the Waffen SS Tiger Commanders of the Leibstandarte in WWII* (2006) by Patrick Agte.



The remains of the British column of half-track vehicles and Bren Carriers that were shot to pieces by Wittmann's tanks. In the foreground is a British 6-pounder (57-mm) gun.

SS PIONEERED

The Waffen-SS was not only known as an organisation with fanatically devoted and efficiently organised soldiers. It was also a groundbreaker in the military field. When German armed forces developed new weapons during the war, it was often soldiers from the Waffen-SS who were first equipped.

Text: **JONAS NILSSON**

EVERETT COLLECTION/IBL

- 
- 1. ASSAULT RIFLES**
 - 2. CAMOUFLAGED UNIFORM**
 - 3. ANTI-TANK WEAPONS**

WAR MATERIEL

This Nazi propaganda photo shows SS soldiers in camouflage uniform during the Ardennes offensive in 1944. The Waffen-SS were quick to realise the benefits of camouflage.

“THE UNIFORMS WERE HIGHLY SOUGHT AFTER AND BECAME THE HALLMARK OF THE WAFFEN-SS”

1 ASSAULT RIFLES

Sturmgewehr was first of its kind



Waffen-SS marksmen were primarily equipped with rifles (Karabiner 98k) at the beginning of the war. This was a short-barrelled version of the Gewehr 98, the standard weapon used by Germans in World War I. The weapon had a limited storage capacity with five standard-calibre (7.92 x 57 mm) cartridges and an effective range of around 500 metres.

Unit commanders, their deputies and some troops were equipped with machine guns (usually the MP 40), their magazines capable of holding 32 cartridges of 9 x 19-mm calibre and an effective range of 100-150 metres. Firing speed was around 550 shots per minute.

FOLLOWING THE INVASION of the Soviet Union, the Waffen-SS was mostly occupied with the battles on the Eastern Front. Soviet tactics primarily involved mass infantry assaults against limited targets. These attacks proved difficult for the Waffen-SS to repel. The standard Karabiner 98ks could only fire one shot at a time and needed reloading after just five shots. In several cases, German positions were overpowered by Soviet mass attacks. Despite the fact Waffen-SS infantry were also armed with

light machine guns, it was clear their defensive fire power was insufficient. This resulted in the new development of a new hand gun in 1942 under the command of weapon designer Hugo Schmeisser. One of the biggest hurdles was that a fully automatic rifle clicked into use too easily. This was caused by heavier recoil due to the powerful gun's fire.

THE SOLUTION WAS a shorter version of the German standard-calibre cartridge at 7.92 x 33 mm. The weapon also incorporated a straight-line recoil configuration that made it easier to resist the muzzle rise of the gun barrel during combat.

These seemingly small innovations were introduced first in the Sturmgewehr 44 (StG-44), allowing the marksman to deliver controlled automatic fire. Field trials were initiated with some Waffen-SS units in October 1943, and results showed the weapon to be effective. In battles against an enemy armed with the Soviet PPSH-41 submachine gun, the STG-44's longer range was an advantage along with its ability to deliver

★ FACTS

Sturmgewehr 44

Calibre:

7.92 x 33 mm

Magazine:

30 cartridges

Weight:

4.6 kg (unloaded),

5.13 kg (loaded)

Length: 94 cm

Rate of fire:

550-600 shots

per minute

Range:

300 m (automatic),

600 m (single shot)

A soldier from the 5th SS Panzer Division Wiking trains his StG-44 rifle on an armoured tank near Warsaw in 1944. Behind him is a marksman with a Karabiner 98k rifle fitted with a telescope.



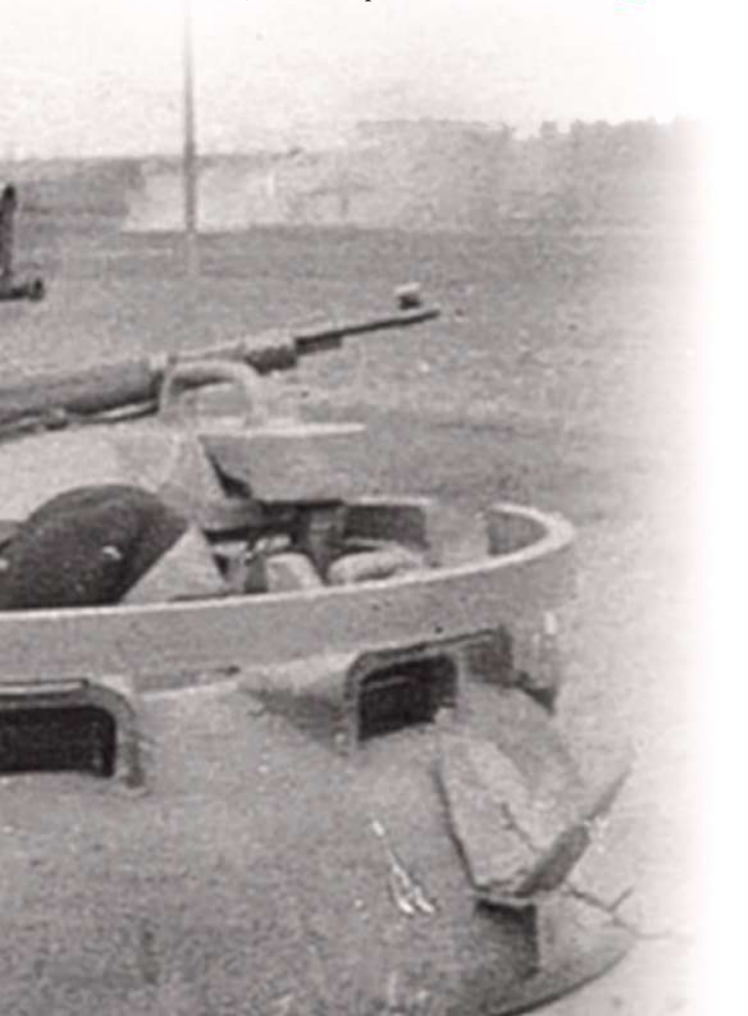
“ONE DRAWBACK WAS THAT THE WEAPON WAS SENSITIVE TO DIRT”

controlled automatic fire in close-combat situations. One drawback was that the weapon was sensitive to dirt and had to be kept clean to work. Moreover, there was a lack of tolerance between the bolt and the magazine, which meant that the weapon might jam when firing. However, it was easy to repair because you could split the weapon by removing the barrel. Another disadvantage was that the weapon used a different cartridge than regular ammunition, which caused logistical difficulties with production.

FIELD TRIALS SHOWED that the StG-44 was an extremely effective weapon. Large-scale production started in early 1944, and German confidence in the weapon was so great that both the Karabin 98k and MP 40 were planned to be replaced.

The StG-44 was still relatively complicated and expensive to manufacture. The Germans managed to produce about 400,000 units (figures are uncertain) between 1943 and 1945, which is far less than the initial order for four million.

After the war, Russian general and military engineer Michail Kalashnikov studied a captured StG-44, which inspired the Soviet AK-47. ★



The ZG 1229 Vampir comprised a telescopic sight with infrared spotlight on top.

Infrared sight provided secure night shooting

★ Germany was the first country to develop a functioning infrared sight. AEG Zielgerät developed the ZG 1229 Vampir for the StG-44 rifle that provided an infrared filter that boosted natural light.

Work on developing the sight began in spring 1944, but limited field trials were only carried out in February 1945. 310 samples were given to various units in the Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht.

The trials showed that it worked effectively even in almost total darkness. The range was 300-400 metres.

Those Red Army troops who encountered the sharpshooters equipped with infrared sights got an unpleasant surprise. Soviet reports refer to several soldiers who were shot after believing they were invisible to the enemy.


One major drawback was its weight. The sight itself weighed 2.25 kg, which made it difficult to keep the weapon in the ready position for long periods. But an even bigger issue was the need for an external battery pack. The batteries were stored in a

backpack and weighed 13.5 kg. The batteries allowed the device to be lit for around two hours. Given these limitations and the ZG 1229's appearance only when the war was already lost, it's not surprising it never made a major breakthrough.

Germany's experiments with infrared, aimed primarily at artillery and vehicles, started in 1936. Here too AEG had been responsible for development. From 1936 onwards Germany expanded with infrared aimed at artillery and vehicles, again produced by AEG.

In June 1943 a field trial was conducted to test the Zielgerät FG 1250, which was mounted on two armoured tanks from the 6th Panzer Army. Its range was about 600 metres. The trials proved the infrared device increased early detection of enemy armoured vehicles, but it proved difficult to hit these targets using just the infrared sight.

The 1st SS Panzer Division were given a small number of Panther tanks equipped with infrared sight, which they used successfully in fighting in Hungary in March 1945.



The Waffen-SS were pioneers in camouflage. On the left a soldier in camouflage uniform, on the right a Untersturmführer with the older grey uniform. Photo taken on the Eastern Front, 1943.

2 CAMOUFLAGED UNIFORM

Reversible jackets offered flexible masking

Germany was the first to introduce field uniform with camouflage fabric. In 1939 the Waffen SS's field uniform was similar to that used by the regular German army. It consisted of a grey field jacket and coarse woollen trousers, usually accompanied by black boots and a grey field cap. When it was cold, there was a long coat. Few changes were made to the uniform for Waffen-SS soldiers: moving the eagle emblem from the right breast to the left upper arm, plus a few differences in rank insignia, the belt buckle and so on.

This was a relatively old-fashioned uniform that neither concealed the soldier nor kept him warm

during cold weather. It was largely similar to the uniform used by the German infantry during World War I, plus it didn't fulfil the Waffen-SS's desire to distance itself from the regular German army.

EXPERIMENTS WITH CAMOUFLAGED tent cloths, vehicle chassis and so on were carried out by the German army during the 1930s. In 1937 limited field trials were conducted with uniform in camouflage fabric with the Deutschland regiment of the SS-VT under the command of the chief of the German camouflage unit Johan Georg Otto Schick and Sturmbannführer Wim Brant. The uniforms



Platanenmuster, summer.



Platanenmuster, autumn.

were made from water-repellent, lined cotton in a pattern that the Germans called *Platanenmuster* (plane tree pattern). Various large green and brown areas were covered in lighter and darker irregularly shaped spots. The uniforms were reversible with a greener side that was thought to merge with the green in spring and summer, plus a browner side for autumn. A helmet protector was also introduced with the same pattern.

The field trials confirmed that the soldiers were significantly more difficult to detect in the new uniform than in the usual grey. According to Schick, the soldiers in the new camouflage would have 10-15 percent less risk of being hit by enemy fire.

The disadvantage was that because the material for the uniform was made from water-repellent cotton with the camouflage pattern printed on, it was expensive. Camouflage uniforms were introduced and made available for prioritised forces and soldiers with specialist functions (such as marksmen) within the Waffen-SS in the years 1937-40.

THE UNIFORMS WERE highly sought after and became the hallmark of the Waffen-SS. Brantto even tried to patent the pattern in accordance with German civil law to prevent units in the regular Wehrmacht from being able to produce similar uniforms to the Waffen-SS.

This wasn't a complete success – it's known that units from the Wehrmacht – including the Luftwaffe – were equipped with field camouflage uniforms from 1943 on. In 1940, more than 30,000 camouflage uniforms

“A SHORTAGE OF COTTON BECAME AN EVER-INCREASING PROBLEM BY THE WAR'S END”

had been manufactured, making it possible to equip larger Waffen-SS units.

In 1943 a modified pattern was introduced to the camouflaged fabric. The Germans called it *Eichenlaubmuster* (oak leaf pattern A). The pattern was similar to *Platanenmuster*, but with larger spots. At the same time a reversible jacket was introduced: white for winter use and the other side in camouflage when the snow had melted.



A SHORTAGE OF cotton became an ever-increasing problem by the war's end, however, and the quality of camouflage uniforms varied greatly in 1944-45.

It's likely that camouflage uniforms did offer some advantage over the enemy, who had uniforms in single-coloured clay-brown cloth (Soviet) or khaki (US and UK).

The camouflage uniform was also considered to be a deterrent to Allied soldiers. If they saw it, they knew they were probably facing often fanatical and aggressive Waffen-SS soldiers. ★

Reversible weapon jacket with white winter camouflage on the inside.

**“THE WEAPON HAD A
SIMPLE FLIP-UP SIGHT”**

An SS soldier awaits the enemy with a Panzerfaust 60 as his protection. The Panzerfaust could break through all Allied tanks.

3 ANTI-TANK WEAPONS

Targeted explosion punched through armour

The Germans had realised as early as World War I that infantry needed a portable weapon to use against the tanks the British and French had deployed on the Western Front. A large-calibre rifle was introduced, the Mauser 1918 T-Gewehr with 13.2 x 92-mm cartridges. The weapon was accurate up to around 500 metres and had leg support that helped the marksman, but the effect on the target (tanks) was limited. By the outbreak of World War II, many countries had similar weapons. Lightweight anti-tank guns were also introduced.

Their impact on the increasingly heavy and reinforced tanks was a growing problem during the war. The Soviet T-34 was technically invulnerable to fire from German 37-mm anti-tank guns. The problem became even more acute because the Soviets kept building up its tank strength. The war on the Eastern Front was increasingly a battle between tanks.

It was a frightening prospect for Waffen-SS troops to be confronted by armoured tanks with no means of combating them. One solution was to introduce weapons such as grenades with a directed explosive action. These possessed a cone-shaped explosive charge encased in metal, often copper. On impact, the top was squeezed together and a thin jet of molten metal would cut through even relatively well-armoured vehicles.

IN 1943, THE Raketenwerfer 43 anti-tank rocket launcher – known as Panzerschreck – was introduced. Armed grenadiers in the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich were the first to be equipped with the weapon. It was very simple and consisted of a firing tube with simple aiming mechanism. The weapon fired 88mm-calibre shells with a directed explosive effect. The rocket's concentrated metal jet could penetrate 100-mm armour, which was believed to be enough to strike through most tanks – for example, the most common tank type, the T-34, had 60-mm front armour. One drawback was the flame of fire from the rocket's exhaust during launch. The shooter required protective clothing and a protective mask with a filter to avoid burns. The launcher's recoil was also dangerous for those behind, while smoke and dust would reveal the launcher's position. The Raketenwerfer 54, introduced in 1944, had a shield to protect the gunner from the exhaust flame.

Performance was generally good and the Panzerschreck was considered a simple and well-

suited weapon. It was also relatively easy and cheap to produce. Between 1943-45 more than 200,000 weapons were produced. All Waffen-SS divisions were equipped with this model.

IN AUGUST 1943 the Panzerschreck was partially superseded by the Panzerfaust, which consisted of a tube with black powder as the propellant and a shaped warhead with a directed explosive effect. The weapon had a simple flip-up sight. The calibres varied. The first version, Panzerfaust 30, had a calibre of around 100 mm. The later version, the Panzerfaust 60, had a calibre of 149 mm. Panzerfaust 30 could penetrate 140-mm armour. The introduction of Panzerfaust helped greatly to increase the German infantry's defensive capabilities. No Allied tanks could withstand strikes from a Panzerfaust. The Allies attempted to improve the tank defences by attaching sandbags, logs, and so on. A more "official" effort to improve tank armour saw outer armour plates mounted that caused the shell or rocket to explode prematurely. Thus, a space was created between the armour plate and tank body to lessen the effect of the explosive jet. Panzerfaust disadvantages included a dangerous exhaust flame and the fact the weapon could only be used once.

In January 1945 a version was introduced that could be recharged up to ten times, but it was not widely used. ★



★ FACTS

Panzerfaust 60

Calibre: 14.9 cm

Range: 60 m

Weight: 6.8 kg

Armour

penetration:

200 mm

★ FACTS

Panzerschreck

Calibre: 88 mm

Range: 150 m

Weight: 11 kg

Armour

penetration:

100 mm,

later 160 mm



German soldiers
with Panzerschreck.

ULSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES

Castle Itter, 1945

Unholy alliance held SS at bay

A determined US Army lieutenant, a disillusioned major from the Wehrmacht and a French tennis star all fought side-by-side during one of WWII's last skirmishes: the Battle for Castle Itter on 5th May, 1945.

Text: **OLLE BERGMAN**

It was the morning of 4th May, 1945, and the US troops were in East Tyrol, half a mile from the German border. Lieutenant Jack Lee Jr sat on the tower of his M4 Sherman tank – *Besotten Jenny* – in the small town of Kufstein as he planned how to defend the town square. After five months fighting

in France and Germany, he and his men were weary and fed up of being in “Krautland” just to see out the war’s final days. But the men in Company B of the US 12th Armored Division’s 23rd Tank Battalion had to remain on alert. German forces who refused to surrender were proving stiff resistance in the mountainous landscape and were armed with both tanks and anti-tank guns. The forests swarmed with bitter SS soldiers who were still determined to kill – both American enemies and countrymen who they perceived to be traitors.

THIS MORNING WAS about to become almost surreal. A German *Kübelwagen* (lightly armoured vehicle) suddenly rolled towards Lee and his men with a white flag fluttering in the wind. The passenger seat housed a decorated major in the Wehrmacht,

**“THE FORESTS
SWARMED WITH
SS SOLDIERS”**

one Josef Gangl, and he presented a strange, yet coherent, story. Higher up in the mountains lay a castle full of French VIP prisoners who feared for their lives and were appealing to be rescued. Lee didn't hesitate for a moment and contacted his superior over the radio to get permission to investigate. He took a seat in the back of the German vehicle for a reconnaissance trip. Soon he would play the lead role in what would become known as the "strangest battle of World War II".

CASTLE ITTER, OR *Schloss Itter* in its native language, has medieval roots and is located on a hill near the ski resort of Kitzbühel. At the beginning of 1943 it was converted into a special prison for VIP prisoners, called *Ehrenhäftlinge* (detainees of honour). These were politicians and military leaders who were treated decently and lived quite comfortably in anticipation of an eventual negotiated release – or swift execution. Administratively, Castle Itter belonged to the concentration camp Dachau outside Munich, around ten miles to the north.

By the end of the war, the prisoners in Castle Itter comprised a mixture of France's social elite, including former Prime Ministers Edouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud, plus military commanders Maurice Gamelin and Maxime Weygand. The most colourful character was Jean Borotra, a former world-class tennis player ▶



Josef Gangl.



Jean Borotra.



Castle Itter is located around 3 km west of Kitzbühel.



Jack Lee Jr.



The castle was built to cope with a classical siege in the Middle Ages. The basics were not so different in May 1945.

SCHLOSS ITTER 1945

► and a well-known sportsman in his homeland. Maintenance and services were carried out by a small number of regular prisoners of war. The guard garrison, comprising personnel from the notorious SS-Totenkopf division, was commanded by Hauptsturmführer Sebastian Wimmer.

On 3rd May, Wimmer dispatched one of the prisoners, Yugoslav Zvonimir Čučković, on an errand. What he didn't realise was that Čučković also carried a secret letter, written in English, with a plea for help. The French prisoners had an overview of the military situation and feared that they would be cleared out of the way in the chaos of the war's final days.

After cycling to Innsbruck, six miles further west, Čučković passed on the message to an American unit. A rescue force was being prepared, but it had run into trouble and the relief mission was delayed.

The alcoholic Wimmer became increasingly nervous, not least because a few days earlier the commander at Dachau, Eduard Weiter, had appeared drunk at Castle Itter before shooting himself. On 4th May, Wimmer left his post, and shortly after, the guards also abandoned the prison.

**Politician
Edouard
Daladier
and General
Maurice
Gamelin shortly
after their
release. The
castle is in the
background.**

THE PRISONERS STILL feared for their lives and planned how to defend themselves. They broke into the weapon store and found small arms and ammunition. In the town of Itter they contacted a German soldier whom they trusted: Hauptsturmführer Kurt-Siegfried Schrader, who'd been exempted from service because of an injury. He agreed to lead the defence of the castle with the prisoners.

Now another prisoner departed, the Czech chef Andreas Krobot. He rode to the city of Wörgl on

"AN EXPLOSION WAS HEARD AND THE LINE WENT DEAD"

the morning of 4th May and carried a letter in English. The city was swarming with Waffen-SS soldiers, but he was lucky and chanced on an Australian resistance fighter in a side street. Krobot was quickly taken to their leader, Wehrmacht Major Josef Gangl, who had switched sides and now tried to protect the civilian population from abuses. Gangl decided to act, got into a Kübelwagen and drove to the Americans in nearby Kufstein, where he encountered Lieutenant Lee.

After Gangl and Lee had visited the castle and met the French, they promised to return with a relief force. Initially they hoped to be able to muster a large group, but due to tactical decisions and some issues encountered on the road, it shrunk to practically nothing. By the time the force eventually reached the castle in the afternoon, it comprised Lieutenant Lee's M4 Sherman and crew, a handful of infantry from the US's 142nd Infantry Regiment and a dozen or so German soldiers, including Major Gangl.

At the castle the prisoners informed them that German soldiers had moved into the surrounding area and that they'd brought anti-tank guns. Lee, Gangl and Schrader then started organising a defence and placed the Sherman in the middle of the castle entrance.

THE SS SOLDIERS were obviously prepared for a fierce battle to enter the castle. In the early hours of 5th May, they began to test the defences through advanced patrols and gunfire. After dawn broke the defenders received a setback when a young German soldier in the defence force left the castle and switched to the enemy. Now it was impossible to hide the fact the defensive force was only a small one.

Shortly afterwards, the situation became far worse when the defenders discovered that a larger enemy force had arrived in transport vehicles. They were evidently from the 17th SS Panzer-Grenadier Division. Soon the area around the castle had filled with Waffen-SS soldiers with their characteristic camouflaged uniforms – a total of around 100-150 men. It was also clear the Germans had two anti-aircraft guns – one 20-mm, the other 88-mm.

In the morning, the Waffen-SS soldiers began to shell the castle with increasing intensity while advancing from different directions. In the middle of the chaos, however, the defenders discovered they still had a working phone line. Through this, Gangl managed to call down to Wörgl and pick up another three defenders from the city, who were able to reach the castle without being stopped on the road.

The fighting became increasingly fierce as the anti-aircraft gun fired explosive grenades against

ERIC SCHWAB/AFP/TT



US forces with a M4 Sherman tanks approach the castle on 5th May, 1945.

ERIC SCHWAB/AFP/TT



the castle walls and Lee's Sherman *Besotten Jenny* was destroyed by the other cannon. The defenders returned fire, but they had little ammunition. Five of the French prisoners participated in the fighting, despite the fact the commanders ordered them to stay in the basement. When Gangl was trying to get 67-year-old former Prime Minister Reynaud away from a dangerous situation, the major was hit by a bullet to his head – probably from a sniper – and died.

As Lee processed the loss, the phone suddenly rang again. Thanks to Austrian resistance fighters, Major John Kramers of the US 103rd Infantry Division – who was travelling to Innsbruck to rescue the prisoners – had managed to make contact. Lee immediately responded: “They’re shelling the bajabers out of us. Listen, better get some doughs [GIs] up here right away.” Then an explosion was heard and the line went dead.

KRAMERS, DESPITE BEING outside his division's sphere of influence, helped put together a rescue force. At the same time, back at the castle Lee received a suggestion from Jean Borotra. During his internment at the castle, the adventurous tennis star had completed a couple of half-successful escape attempts, and said he was willing to run through the German lines and brief the rescue force with a situation report. No sooner said than done: Borotra disguised himself as an Austrian farmer, jumped down from the wall, trudged cautiously past a German machine gun post and started down into the valley. One of the officers in

the rescue force – a sport journalist – couldn't believe his own eyes when a French tennis legend suddenly appeared in the middle of enemy territory jogging at a steady pace towards them.

When the relief force appeared at the castle – like the cavalry in a western movie – a Waffen-SS soldier was about to blow up the gate using a Panzerfaust. At this point, the defenders' ammunition was almost exhausted and they had retreated to the inner keep to fight one final battle.

THE SIGHT OF US tanks and troop vehicles saw the Waffen SS soldiers quickly disappear into the surrounding terrain. In a minute, the castle's hopeless situation had been transformed into one of relief and cheering. The rescue force also included one of the tanks from Lee's own Company B, and it was to his friend the tank commander that Lee said jokingly, “What kept you?”

What orders the Waffen SS soldiers had been given, or how they'd perceived the situation, nobody knows today; it's assumed that they had been ordered to execute the prisoners.

Two days later, Germany's unconditional surrender came into effect. The 27-year-old lieutenant Jack Lee Jr received the Distinguished Service Cross for his efforts. Josef Gangl was honoured with a gate in Wörgl, three kilometres from the place where he died. ★

Olle Bergman is a freelance journalist.

Further reading:
The Last Battle (2013)
by Stephen Harding.

LEIBSTANDARTE SS ADOLF HITLER

HITLER'S

The SS division with the closest ties to Adolf Hitler was his personal bodyguard: Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler. The force was deployed across all fronts during the war and took no account of either their own losses or their enemy's pleas for mercy.

Text: **SVANTE SANDBLOM**

Adolf Hitler inspects his bodyguard at their barracks in Berlin-Lichtenfelde. Sepp Dietrich, the division's commander, walks on his right.

ULLSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES

DIVISION



**"THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE SUPERIOR,
A CHOSEN ELITE OF A SUPERIOR RACE"**



Soldiers from Leibstandarte stand to attention in Königsplatz Square in Munich on 11th September, 1935.

SS division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler – Hitler’s personal bodyguard – fought on all European fronts during World War II. The division was an infantry task force tasked with taking on offensives against hopeless odds and plugging holes in the German front lines. Leibstandarte fought bravely without any regard for its losses, but it was equally dispassionate towards its enemies, showing them no mercy. The division’s war crimes were countless: both prisoners of war and civilians became victims of its ruthless soldiers.

In 1925, an early precursor to Leibstandarte was established: the *Schutzkommando* (Protection Command). It was set up to provide a bodyguard for Hitler during a turbulent time in German history where there was much street violence, making it important that the budding Nazi movement guarantee its leader’s security. In order to create a strong bond with the future Führer, soldiers in Hitler’s bodyguard swore a personal oath of



Early in 1941, a skeleton key was introduced as the division’s symbol to honour its commander, Sepp Dietrich. Dietrich means a key that can open all locks in German.

allegiance to him for the first time on 9th November, 1933. The solemn, formal ceremony took place at Odeonsplatz, a square in the centre of Munich. Five months later, on 13th April, 1934, the unit received its new name: Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler.

The unit was often present during Hitler’s official appearances, wearing its characteristic black SS parade uniform. Leibstandarte’s troops were often contemptuously dismissed as “asphalt soldiers” by the regular German armed forces (Wehrmacht), who continually vied with the SS bodyguards for the Führer’s favour.

THE ENTRY REQUIREMENTS for new recruits were tough. The idea was to ensure that only the ‘best’ young Germans could apply. Applicants needed to be a minimum of 170cm tall, be in excellent physical condition and be able to demonstrate that they had several generations worth of Aryan antecedents.

The training of new recruits for Leibstandarte took place in the Lichterfelde barracks south-west of Berlin. The large complex of buildings was surmounted with a giant German eagle and the text “Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler” in capital letters. Statues of old German emperors adorned the site, which also featured a huge dining room that could seat up to a thousand people.

The soldiers in Leibstandarte thought of themselves as a select elite. Aggressiveness, physical endurance and a willingness to win at all costs were key parts of

“THE SNOW WAS WAIST-DEEP AND THERE WASN’T ROOM TO DEPLOY FOUR TANKS ABREAST, LET ALONE SIX ARMoured DIVISIONS.”

their training. The saying “attack is the best defence” characterised the culture of strength from the outset.

The recruits came from various locations within Germany, and many of them were the sons of peasants. The soldiers enlisted for 12 years, and the indoctrination was extensive: lessons on Nazi ideology were taught three times a week.

Leibstandarte – as Hitler’s own elite force – took a leading role during the occupation of the Rhineland in 1935, the Nazis’ first step in challenging the Treaty of Versailles from 1919. It continued at the forefront of things as Hitler extended his territory further with the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938, and the rest of Czechoslovakia in 1939.

At the end of 1938, Leibstandarte became a regiment, but remained under Wehrmacht command in battle. During the Polish campaign in September 1939, Leibstandarte was first attached to the 17th Infantry Division and later the 4th Panzer Division. Leibstandarte participated in the Battle of the Bzura, which was fought west of Warsaw, where the Poles mounted their largest counteroffensive of the war.

LEIBSTANDARTE’S TROOPS FOUGHT without any regard for their own losses. As a result, it took significantly more damage during the Polish campaign than the Wehrmacht. Like other SS forces, Leibstandarte also treated civilians without mercy: in Blonie its troops murdered 50 Jews, while 200 Polish civilians were killed in Zloczew.

Along with other units in the German Army, Leibstandarte was able to rest during the winter of 1939-40. Hitler visited the unit in its winter lodgings at Bad Ems in the Rhineland during December 1939.

On 10th May, 1940, the Nazis began their offensive against Western Europe. Leibstandarte was deployed to the northern section of the Front, attacking the Netherlands and Belgium. It managed to capture 3,500 Dutch soldiers, but became notorious for its massacre of 80 French and British prisoners of war at Wormhoudt (see box, right).

Leibstandarte continued to be part of the offensive, advancing deep into France. Following France’s surrender on 22nd June, 1940, Leibstandarte began training to carry out landings on English beaches as part of Operation *Seelöwe* (Sea lion), the Germans’ planned invasion of Britain. The plan was aborted.

Leibstandarte then moved to Bulgaria in February 1941 as part of the preparations for the upcoming offensives against Yugoslavia and Greece, which started on 6th April, 1941. After hard fighting in the Klidi Pass, British and ANZAC troops from the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps were defeated by German forces and Leibstandarte took part in the victory parade in Athens.

When the Germans massed their forces in the build up to the invasion of the Soviet Union during



An American soldier looks down on the bodies of US prisoners of war killed in the Malmedy massacre during December 1944.

US ARMY

The division was ruthless

★ Leibstandarte was responsible for countless criminal actions during World War II:

WORMHOUDT MASSACRE

On 28th May, 1940, after helping buy time for their comrades to escape from Dunkirk, 80 British and French soldiers were taken prisoners of war before being gunned down in a barn in a hamlet near Wormhoudt.

Major General Wilhelm Mohnke was accused of being responsible for the incident, but was never charged.

EASTERN FRONT

According to allegations made by Erick Kern, a journalist who served with Leibstandarte’s 4th Battalion, the division executed 4,000 Russian prisoners of war in retaliation for around 100 Germans whom it believed to have been captured and hung by Russians troops a few miles from Gejgova.

Later that year, during the fighting around Kharkov, Kurt ‘Pantermeyer’ Meyer ordered

an entire village torched and its inhabitants murdered. There is also evidence to suggest that Leibstandarte was involved in a massacre of tens of thousands of Russian civilians during its occupation of Kharkov, including hospital patients, but the Soviets failed to prosecute the criminals after the war.

MALMEDY MASSACRE

On 17th December, 1944, 86 US prisoners of war were shot after being captured near Malmedy in Belgium. It has been claimed that George Fleps, a 21-year-old volunteer from Romania, opened fired with his machine gun before other SS men joined the slaughter. Survivors were finished off with small arms.

BATTLE OF THE BULGE

During the Battle of the Bulge, a number of civilians were executed in Stavelot in the area where Kampfgruppe Peiper’s group was fighting. Around 130 civilians were killed in a single day.



Adolf Hitler surrounded by senior officers from Leibstandarte. Sepp Dietrich sits on his right.

ULSTEINBILD/IBL

Division commanders

JOSEF 'SEPP' DIETRICH

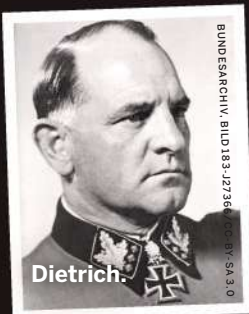
1933 - June 1943

★ Dietrich and Hitler met for the first time in 1921. Seven years later Dietrich became a member of the Nazi party. As

one of the Führer's personal bodyguards, Dietrich was close to Hitler, which made his boss Himmler jealous.

He was Leibstandarte's great star until the end of the war. He rose rapidly through the ranks of the SS, but remained strongly linked to the division. He liked to eat with the men, something that was not common in the army at this time.

Dietrich was relatively small, but had powerful



BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 183-J27364 (CC-BY-SA 3.0)

charisma. A father figure for the men of Leibstandarte, he viewed soldiers as individuals, but was also strict and authoritarian.

Field Marshal Gerd von

Rundstedt described Dietrich as "decent, but stupid", while SS General Felix Steiner reported that he once spent an hour and a half with Dietrich trying to explain a situation with the aid of a map, but Dietrich did not understand anything of the drawing in front of him.

Dietrich was captured by US forces at the end of the war and spent 10 years in prison. He died of a heart attack on 21st April, 1966.

► Operation Barbarossa, Leibstandarte was attached to Army Group South. The division participated in the encircling battles at Uman and Kiev before capturing, losing and then reclaiming Rostov.

After recapturing Rostov in 1942, it was pulled from the Eastern Front and stationed in Normandy. While there, Leibstandarte was refitted as a panzer grenadier division and joined the I SS Panzer Corps, returning to the Eastern Front in December.

THE NEW PANZER corps contributed to German success at the third battle at Kharkov in March 1943 where, under the leadership of Erich von Manstein and against all odds, the Germans stabilised the Southern Front after the disaster of Stalingrad. Leibstandarte attacked with the Waffen-SS division Totenkopf. While the battle was lauded as a great victory, the Germans suffered major losses in the action: 4,500 of Leibstandarte's troops were killed in action alone.

At the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, Leibstandarte was again part of the German offensive. The division now joined the II SS Panzer Corps (Das Reich) and advanced 20 kilometres on the first day of the battle. Michael Wittman, Leibstandarte's legendary panzer tank ace, enjoyed phenomenal success during the Kursk battle: he destroyed eight Soviet tanks and seven Soviet anti-tank guns in a single day.

Despite such efforts, the Nazis struggled to gain the upper hand over the Soviet superpower. The German



CONTINUED ON PAGE 120 ►

offensive at Kursk stalled and Leibstandarte was now needed elsewhere: the Allies had landed in Sicily and Italy was about to sign an armistice with its former enemies. Hitler wanted units that were 100 percent loyal to him and so he withdrew Leibstandarte from the battle at Kursk and sent it to Italy.

LEIBSTANDARTE MONITORED IMPORTANT roads and railway hubs in the area of Verona and helped disarm the Italians after they declared a ceasefire on 8th September, 1943. At this time, the unit was converted to a panzer division and battled Italian partisans in the area around Parma.

Things weren't going well for the Germans back on the Eastern Front though. Their offensive had once again stalled in the south after the battle in Kursk, and Leibstandarte was recalled to help stabilise the situation. The division arrived to reinforce the German line at Zhitomir, 140 kilometres south-west of Kiev, in the middle of November 1943. In January the following year, it was re-deployed to help relieve the German forces of Army Group South who were encircled in the Korsun Pocket. The action extricated around 30,000 Wehrmacht troops, but 56,000 were left behind to face the horrors of Soviet captivity.

Following the battles around Korsun, most of the Leibstandarte division was transported to Belgium for rest and reequipping. By the end of April 1944, the division was back to full strength. Leibstandarte

“LEIBSTANDARTE WAS REFITTED AS A PANZER GRENADIER DIVISION AND JOINED THE I SS PANZER CORPS”

was deployed north of the Seine as part of Hitler's strategic armoured reserve to counter the Allied landings that were expected around Calais. It was not until the end of June that the division headed to Normandy, where Leibstandarte fought against the British and Canadians at Caen.

THE GERMANS MOUNTED an impressive defence, taking full advantage of Normandy's wooded terrain. In fact, they exceeded many people's expectations, but, in the end, the Nazi forces were overwhelmingly beaten by the Allies' superior hardware and air support. The US Eighth Army finally broke through the German front line, taking Avranches on 30th July. Hitler ordered his men to stage a counterattack, but it failed and Leibstandarte had to fight desperately to avoid being completely wiped out after they were enveloped by the Allies in the Falaise Pocket. The battle led to major losses, and the remains of the Leibstandarte division retreated east to Aachen, where they were refitted once more.

Leibstandarte went on to join up with its former chief, Field Marshal Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich, who was ►

**SS Panzer Grenadier Division
Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler during
Operation Spring Awakening in Hungary
in 1945.**



MICHAEL CREMIN/ALAMY

► DIVISION COMMANDERS (CONTINUED)

THEODOR WISCH

4th June, 1943 –
20th Aug, 1944

★ Wisch was one of the first members of Leibstandarte, joining in March 1933. He was a company commander during the Polish campaign in 1939 and he was awarded the Iron Cross. Wisch led the regiment



from June 1942 and became its head on 27th July, 1943 when he was 36. He was severely injured in the Battle of the Falaise Pocket and had to surrender command to

Wilhelm Mohnke. Wisch did not have Dietrich's charisma, but was respected for his professionalism.

WILHELM MOHNKE

20th Aug, 1944 –
6th Feb, 1945

★ Mohnke joined the Nazi party in 1931 and was chosen by Dietrich to be one of the first members of SS Stabswache Berlin, a forerunner of Leibstandarte.

He was wounded in the leg during a Yugoslav air attack and surgeons were forced to amputate part of his foot. While he was recovering he was awarded the German Cross in Gold.

After the defeat at the Battle of the Falaise Pocket in August 1944, the German army retreated in disarray. Mohnke was one of the few commanders who managed



to steady the displaced troops to fall back in good order.

In February 1945, he was forced to hand over the command to Otto Kumm after

he was injured during an air raid in Hungary.

On 2nd May, 1945, he was captured by Russian soldiers after leading an escape attempt from Hitler's bunker. After 10 years as a prisoner of war, six of them in solitary confinement, Mohnke was finally released.

After the war, he was accused of being involved in the Wormhoudt massacre in 1940, but was never charged. He died in 2001 in Barsbüttel in northern Germany.

OTTO KUMM

6th Feb, 1945 –
8th May, 1945

★ The last man to lead Leibstandarte Division, Otto Kumm joined the Nazi party and the SS at the age of 22. He was in great physical shape,



which served him well during winters spent in the Soviet Union. After serving as a commander in the SS divisions Wiking and Prinz Eugen, he took command of

Leibstandarte for the war's final months in February 1945.

BUNDESARCHIV, BILD 102-00009 / CC-BY-SA 3.0



Motorcyclists from Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler during a parade in 1939.

“WE CALL OURSELVES THE ‘6TH PANZER ARMY’, BECAUSE WE’VE ONLY GOT SIX PANZERS LEFT”

Sepp Dietrich kept his sense of humour.

► now commanding the 6th SS Panzer Army in the Ardennes for the Battle of the Bulge, Hitler's last chance to take the initiative.

Initially, the Germans made good progress with Leibstandarte split into four kampfguppe, Kampfgruppe Peiper advancing the furthest. This ad-hoc unit commanded by Colonel Joachim Peiper drove their vehicles over landmines rather than let the attack be slowed by the absence of minesweeper units.

After a week, though, the German offensive began to stall. Dietrich summed up the problems facing him. “All I had to do was to cross the river, capture Brussels, and then go on to take the port of Antwerp. The snow was waist-deep and there wasn't room to deploy four tanks abreast, let alone six armoured divisions. It didn't get light until eight and was dark again at four, and my tanks can't fight at night. And all this at Christmas time!”

The 6th SS Panzer Army was eventually withdrawn and redeployed as part of the strategic reserve, but not before Leibstandarte soldiers had committed a new war crime in Malmedy (see page 117).

Along with the three other Waffen-SS divisions that took part in the Battle of the Bulge, Leibstandarte's next stop was Hungary. Ordered there by Hitler himself, they were tasked with joining Operation Spring Awakening. Staged during



Panzer grenadiers from Leibstandarte investigate US equipment in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge.

March 1945, it was the last German offensive of the war. Its goal was to recapture Budapest and take control of the area's oil fields. But the Soviets were too strong, and the operation failed.

Furious, Hitler ordered Leibstandarte and the other Waffen-SS divisions to remove their armbands as a sign of dishonour for not fighting hard enough. The order was meaningless, however: first, because Dietrich refused to relay it and second, because Leibstandarte, together with Das Reich, Totenkopf and Hohenstaufen, had already removed their armbands before arriving in Hungary to prevent news leaking out that the 6th SS Panzer Army had crossed the border.

AFTER THE FAILURE of Operation Spring Awakening, most of Leibstandarte pulled back to Vienna. There the division suffered huge losses and was reduced to two combat groups. Sepp Dietrich kept his humour up to the last: "We call ourselves the '6th Panzer Army', because we've only got six panzers left."

The Battle of Berlin was Leibstandarte's last action. 800 men from Leibstandarte formed the core of the last-ditch defence around the Reich Chancellery and the Führer's bunker until Nazi forces in Berlin finally surrendered on 2nd May, 1945. The Leibstandarte troops who managed to

escape the city surrendered to US troops on the west bank of the Elbe, while the rest surrendered to US forces near the city of Steyr in Austria on 8th May.

THE STORY OF Leibstandarte ended as it began, with the division serving as the Führer's personal bodyguard. In between, the unit had fought on battlefields throughout Europe for almost six years in a manner unprecedented in the annals of warfare: its men fought bravely, against hopeless odds, but they often treated prisoners of war and captured civilians with the ruthlessness they'd learned at the barracks in Lichterfelde.

Leibstandarte was a fighting unit, but one can't claim that the Waffen-SS was any less guilty of the systematic eradication of Jews and other 'undesirables'. As author Michael Reynolds stated when writing about Peiper, "As personal adjutant he would have been privy to virtually everything in Himmler's office and he could not have failed to be aware of Hitler's and Himmler's policies for the ethnic cleansing of the Greater Reich, the organisation and establishment of concentration camps and the overall policy for the genocide of the Jewish race." ★

Svante Sandblom is a freelance journalist and writer of military history.

Further reading: **SS-Leibstandarte The history of the First SS Division** by Rupert Butler ★ **Hitler's Warriors** by Charles Whiting ★ **Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH) at war 1939–1945** by Ian Baxter ★ **Hitler's Bodyguards** by Alan Wyke.

NAZI STORMTROOPERS

Publishing Director: Niels Jespersen
Editor-in-chief: Hanne-Luise Danielsen
Production: Pernille Aagaard
Cover: Sara Hougaard Bagge, Rasmus Jelbo
Translators: Lynda Johnson, Nick Peers, Toni Baxter, Karen Levell

Bringing History to Life is published by:
Bonnier Publications International AS,
PB 433, Sentrum,
0103 Oslo, Norway.

ISSN: 2445-6659
Printed by: Poligrafijas Grupa Mukusala, Latvia

Marketing/Distribution UK and Export:
Marketforce (UK), 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place,
Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU
Tel: +44 (0) 20 3787 9001
www.marketforce.co.uk

Licensing and Syndication:
Regina Erak – regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk
Tel: +44 (0)7753 811622

All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner or form is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the publisher. Whilst every care is taken with the material submitted to this bookazine, no responsibility can be accepted for

loss or damage. Whilst every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders, the sources of some pictures that may be used are varied and, in many cases, obscure.

The publisher is happy to make good in future editions any error or omissions brought to their attention. The publication of any quotes or illustrations for which authorisation has not been given is unintentional.

BONNIER
Publications International



The SS gave everything in the battle for Hitler's Third Reich

After D-Day, Allied troops threaten to break out of the bridgehead in Normandy. Hitler orders 16,000 soldiers from the Hitler Youth to face the enemy. The Führer knows that the young Waffen-SS men will fight to the death. The soldiers have been brought up in Nazism and despite overwhelming opposition, the teenagers resist for 33 days. Blind loyalty leads the SS to countless victories, but their faithfulness also forces the soldiers into extreme brutality and horrific attacks on civilians.



The background of the page is a collage of historical images. At the top, there are several Nazi flags with the word 'DEUTSCHLAND' and 'ERWACHE' (Awake) written on them. Below the flags, there are images of soldiers in uniform, some in combat, and a map of Germany. The overall theme is the military and political power of the SS during the Nazi era.

HIMMLER

The SS and German youth were the mainstay of the Nazi party. Thousands of soldiers in the SS fought to the death.

THE WORST CRIME associated with the SS was the persecution and extermination of the Jewish people. In the final solution, the SS was responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews. The SS was also responsible for the deaths of millions of other people, including the disabled, the elderly, and the young.

THE SS structure

The SS was a highly organized and disciplined force. It was divided into several branches, including the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS-VT), the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS-VT), the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS-VT), and the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS-VT). The SS was also responsible for the administration of the German Reich.

HITLER'S BLACK STORMTROOPERS

With Heinrich Himmler at its head, Hitler's bodyguard developed into a large Nazi fighting force with both military and police authority. The dreaded SS consisted of an "elite of pure Aryan race" and was tasked with implementing the "genocide".

5 The British panic

The British panic in the face of the German attack on the beachhead. The British were forced to retreat and the German forces were able to establish a bridgehead.

6 Shootout in Villers-Bocage

A shootout between German and British forces in Villers-Bocage. The German forces were victorious and the British forces were forced to retreat.

7 Wittmann's solo performance and

Wittmann's solo performance in the battle for the bridgehead. Wittmann was a German tank commander who led a tank into the British lines and destroyed several tanks.

History

BONNIER

Publications International

The SS gave everything in the battle for Hitler's Third Reich

After D-Day, Allied troops threaten to break out of the bridgehead in Normandy. Hitler orders 16,000 soldiers from the Hitler Youth to face the enemy. The Führer knows that the young Waffen-SS men will fight to the death. The soldiers have been brought up in Nazism and despite overwhelming opposition, the teenagers resist for 33 days. Blind loyalty leads the SS to countless victories, but their faithfulness also forces the soldiers into extreme brutality and horrific attacks on civilians.



The background of the page is a collage of historical images. At the top, there are several Nazi flags with the word 'DEUTSCHLAND' and 'ERWACHE' (Awake) written on them. Below the flags, there are images of soldiers in uniform, some in combat, and a map of Germany. The overall theme is the SS and their role in the Third Reich.

HIMMLER

The SS and German youth were the most important part of the Nazi party. Thousands of soldiers in the SS fought to the death.

THE WORST CRIME associated with the SS was the persecution and extermination of the Jewish people. In the 'Final Solution', the SS sought to wipe out the Jewish race. In 1941, the SS began the 'Final Solution' in earnest. They sent Jews to concentration camps, where they were killed. The SS was responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews.

THE SS structure

The SS was a highly organized and disciplined force. It was divided into several branches, including the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS-VT), the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS-VT), and the SS-Verfügungstruppe (SS-VT). The SS-VT was the main fighting force of the SS. It was composed of several divisions, including the 1st SS Division, the 2nd SS Division, and the 3rd SS Division. The SS-VT was known for its extreme loyalty and fighting spirit.

HITLER'S BLACK STORMTROOPERS

With Heinrich Himmler at its head, Hitler's bodyguard developed into a large Nazi fighting force with both military and police authority. The dreaded SS consisted of an 'elite of pure Aryan race' and was tasked with implementing the 'genocide'.

5 The British panic

The British panic as they try to hold the bridgehead in Normandy. The SS and German youth were the most important part of the Nazi party. Thousands of soldiers in the SS fought to the death.

6 Shootout in Villers-Bocage

The SS and German youth were the most important part of the Nazi party. Thousands of soldiers in the SS fought to the death.

7 Wittmann's solo performance and

The SS and German youth were the most important part of the Nazi party. Thousands of soldiers in the SS fought to the death.

132 anti-tank guns

The SS and German youth were the most important part of the Nazi party. Thousands of soldiers in the SS fought to the death.

History

BONNIER

Publications International

